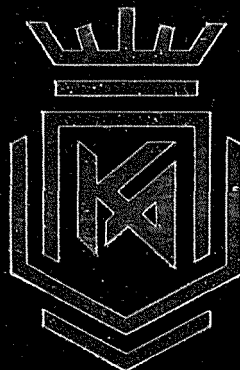


# EXHIBIT 34











## Praise for Tracy Wolff's *Crush*

**An instant *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestseller**

**An Amazon Best YA Book of the Month**

***Glitter* magazine's YA Feminist Must-Reads of 2020**

"Dangerous and intriguing, empowering and swoon-worthy, *Crush* is everything fans of the series didn't know they'd want in a sequel and sets up a third installment you won't want to miss."

**—Hypable**

"From the hilarious one-liners to the death-defying odds, this book had me turning every page like my life depended on it."

**—VocalMedia**

"A fantastic and engrossing follow-up to *Crave*."

**—Frolic Media**

"Double the romance, stakes, and the danger has ramped up to some pretty critical levels..."

And just WAIT until you read that ending."

**—The Nerd Daily**

"*Crush* is pure serotonin. I couldn't stop smiling the entire time I was reading it."

**—CaitsBooks**

"It was mind-boggling, twisty, heart-wrenching goodness all wrapped up into one book."

**—Reading Throughout the World**

"Tracy Wolff is a gem that I am so grateful for. She has put vampire/paranormal reads back on the map and truly does these stories justice!"

**—Living My Best Book Life**

## Praise for Tracy Wolff's *Crave*

**An Amazon Best YA Book of 2020**

***Glitter* magazine's #1 Pick for Best YA of 2020**

★“The generation that missed *Twilight* will be bitten by this one.  
Recommended first purchase.”

**—*SLJ*, starred review**

“*Crave* is about to become fandom's new favorite  
vampire romance obsession.”

**—Hypable**

“Throw in some deadly intrigue to mingle with the dark secret  
Jaxon bears, and you've got a recipe for  
YA vampire success in *Crave*.”

**—*Bustle***

“Wolff has a masterpiece on her hands. It's as simple as that.”

**—Vocal.Media**

“My favorite February read...it's full of suspense and interesting  
characters that keep you turning until the last page!”

**—Aurora Dominguez, Frolic's YA expert**

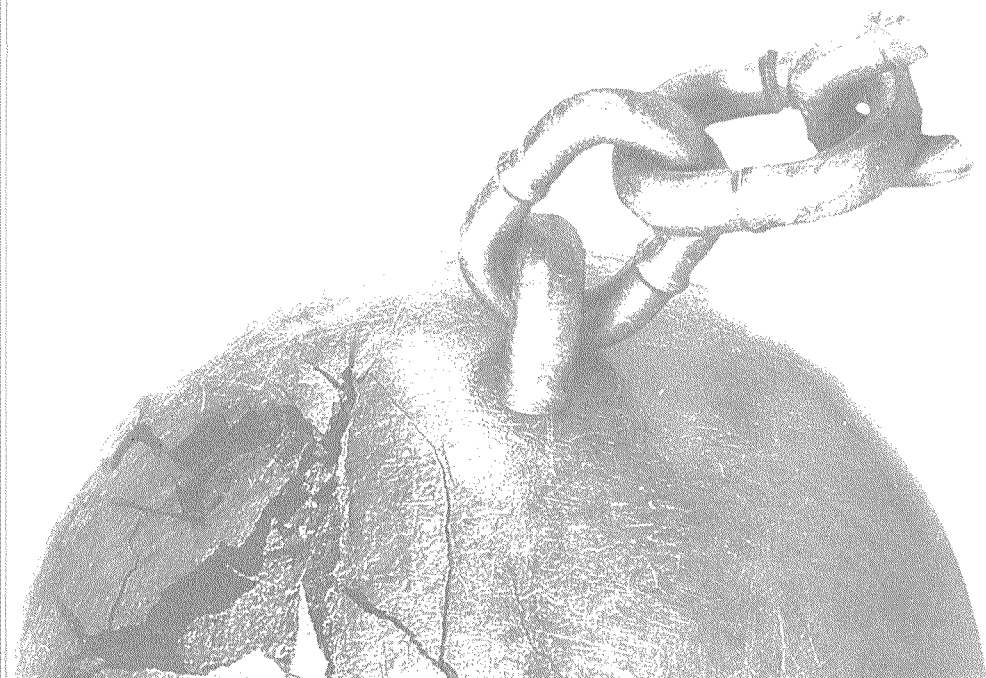
“[C]raving something fun to read, slightly dark  
and romantic...couldn't put it down!”

**—Natalie Morales, NBC**

“Brings gripping tension teeming with a blend of action and  
teenage angst. *Crave* is beautifully descriptive with amazing  
pacing and wonderfully sinister settings.”

**—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Christine Feehan**

c o y e t





c o y e t

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
TRACY WOLFF

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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 **entangled teen**  
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*To my dad, for nurturing my imagination and  
making me believe I could do anything.*

*And for my mother, for supporting and  
loving me through everything.*



**Author's Note:** This book depicts issues of panic attacks, death and violence, emotional torture and incarceration, and some sexual content. It is my hope that these elements have been handled sensitively, but if these issues could be considered triggering to you, please take note.

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## Life After Death



This isn't how it was supposed to happen.

This isn't how *anything* was supposed to happen. Then again, when has my life gone according to plan this year? From the moment I first got to Katmere Academy, so much has been out of my control. Why should today, why should this moment, be any different?

I finish pulling up my tights and straighten my skirt. Then I slide my feet into my favorite pair of black boots and grab my black uniform blazer from the closet.

My hands are shaking a little—to be honest, my whole body is shaking a little—as I ease my arms into the sleeves. But I feel like that's fair. This is the third funeral I've gone to in twelve months. And it hasn't gotten any easier. Nothing has.

It's been five days since I beat the challenge.

Five days since Cole broke the mating bond between Jaxon and me and almost destroyed us both.

Five days since I nearly died...and five days since Xavier actually did.

My stomach pitches and rolls and for a second, I feel like I'm going to throw up.

I take several deep breaths—in through my nose, out through my mouth—to quell the nausea and the panic rising inside me. It takes a minute or three, but eventually both feelings subside enough that it's no longer like I've got a fully loaded 18-wheeler parked on my chest.

It's a small victory, but I'll take it.

I pull in one more deep breath as I fasten the brass buttons on the front of my blazer, then glance in the mirror to make sure I look presentable. I do...as long as you play fast and loose with the definition of "presentable."

My brown eyes are dull, my skin sallow. And my ridiculous curls are

fighting the bun I've wrestled them into. Of course, grief has never been my best look.

At least the bruises from the Ludares challenge have started to fade, turning from their original violent black and purple into that mottled yellow/lavender color that happens just before they disappear completely. And it helps slightly to know that Cole finally hit my uncle's too-many-strikes-and-you're-out limit and got expelled. Part of me wishes that he'll meet an even bigger bully at that school for paranormal delinquents and misfits he was sent to in Texas...just to see how it feels for once.

The bathroom door opens, and my cousin, Macy, walks out, robe on and towel wrapped around her head. I want to hurry her along—we've only got twenty minutes before we're supposed to be in the assembly hall for the memorial—but I can't. Not when she looks like her every breath is an agony.

I know, too well, how that feels.

Instead, I wait for Macy to say something, anything, but she doesn't make a sound as she heads toward her bed and the dress uniform I've laid out for her. It hurts to see her like this, her bruises no less painful than mine for being on the inside.

From my first day at Katmere, Macy has been this irrepressible presence. Light to Jaxon's dark, enthusiasm to Hudson's sarcasm, joy to my sorrow. But now...now it's like every single speck of glitter has disappeared from her life. And from mine.

"Do you need help?" I finally ask as she continues to stare down at her uniform like she's never seen it before.

The blue eyes she turns my way are haunted, empty. "I don't know why I'm being so..." Her voice drifts off as she clears her throat in an attempt to force away the hoarseness of misuse—and the sadness that is causing it. "I barely knew—"

This time she stops, because her voice breaks completely. Her fists clench, and tears swim in her eyes.

"Don't," I say, moving to hug her, because I know what it's like to beat yourself up over something you can't change. Over surviving when someone you love hasn't. "Don't discount your feelings for him just because you didn't know him forever. It's about *how* you know a person, not how long."

She shudders a little, a sob catching in her chest, so I just hug her harder, trying to take away a little bit of her pain and sadness. Trying to do for her

what she did for me when I first got to Katmere.

She holds me just as tightly, tears rolling down her face for so many tortured seconds. “I miss him,” she finally chokes out. “I just miss him so much.”

“I know,” I soothe, rubbing her back in slow circles. “I know.”

She cries in earnest now, shoulders shuddering, body shaking, breath breaking, for minutes that seem to last forever. My heart crumbles in my chest—for Macy, for Xavier, for everything that’s brought us to this moment—and it’s all I can do not to cry with her. But it’s Macy’s turn right now...and my turn to take care of her.

Eventually, she pulls away. Wipes her wet cheeks. Gives me a fragile smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “We need to go,” she whispers with one last pass of her hands over her face. “I don’t want to be late to the memorial.”

“Okay.” I return her smile with one of my own, then walk away to give her some privacy to get dressed.

When I turn back a few minutes later, I can’t help but gasp. Not because Macy has done a glamour to dry and style her hair—I’m used to that—but because her hot-pink hair is now pitch-black.

“It didn’t feel right,” she murmurs as she combs her fingers through a few strands. “Hot pink isn’t exactly a mourning color.”

I know she’s right, and still *I* mourn for the last vestiges of my bright and shiny cousin. We’ve all lost so much recently, and I’m not sure how much more we can take.

“It looks good,” I tell her, because it does. But that’s no surprise—Macy would look good bald or with her hair on fire, and this is a far cry from either of those. It does make her look even more delicate, though. Even more fragile.

“It doesn’t feel good,” she answers. But she’s sliding her feet into a stylish pair of flats, adding earrings to the myriad holes in her ears. Doing another glamour—this one to get rid of her red and puffy eyes.

Her shoulders back, her jaw locked, her eyes are sad but clear as they meet mine. “Let’s do this.” Even her voice is resolved, steely, and it’s that determination that gets me moving toward the door.

I grab my phone to text the others that we’re on our way, but the second I pull open the door, I figure out it’s unnecessary. Because they’re all right here in the hall, waiting for us. Flint, Eden, Mekhi, Luca. Jaxon...and Hudson. Some are more banged up than others, but they’re all a little worse for wear—

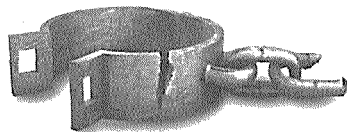
just like Macy and me—and my heart swells as I look them over.

Things are a mess right now—oh my God, are they a mess—but one thing hasn't changed. These seven people have my back and I have theirs... and I always will.

But as my eyes meet Jaxon's cold, dark ones, I can't help acknowledging that while one thing hasn't changed, everything else has.

And I have no idea what to do about any of it.

## Check Your Mate



*Three weeks later...*

“I’m begging you.” Macy throws herself across her rainbow-comforter-covered bed and stares at me with imploring eyes. It’s so good to see her finally almost smiling again since Xavier’s funeral that I can’t help myself from smiling back. It’s not a full smile yet, but I’ll take it. “For the love of God, please, please, pleeeeeeease put those boys out of their misery.”

“That’s going to be hard,” I answer as I drop my backpack next to my desk before flopping down on my own bed. “Considering I haven’t put them *into* their misery.”

“That is the biggest lie you have ever told.” My cousin snorts, then lifts her head just enough to make sure that I can see her rolling her eyes. “You are one hundred and fifty percent responsible for the way Jaxon and Hudson have been moping around school for the last three weeks.”

“I feel like there are a lot of reasons Jaxon and Hudson are moping around school, and I’m only to blame for about half of them,” I shoot back...then immediately regret the words.

Not because they aren’t true but because I now have to watch as the little bit of color Macy had in her cheeks slowly drains away. She looks so different from the girl I met in November that it’s hard to believe she’s the same person. Her wildly colored hair still hasn’t made a reappearance, and while the deep raven black she dyed it for Xavier’s funeral suits her coloring, it doesn’t suit anything else about her. Except her sadness...it suits that just fine.

I start to apologize, but Macy rolls over to face me and plows ahead. “I know exactly what a miserable vampire looks like, and you’ve got two of them on your hands. And just an FYI, deadly and pathetic make for a really dangerous combination, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed.” It’s a combination I’ve been dealing with for weeks, a combination that makes my every breath feel like a bomb about to go off, my every move like I’m playing Russian roulette with everyone’s happiness.

And since the universe just isn’t done screwing with me...apparently, Macy was wrong when she first told me that Hudson had graduated before Jaxon killed him. Turns out: nope, so close and yet not quite there. Something about him lacking enough credits because he’d had private tutors instead of attending Katmere for all four years. Macy was several years his junior, so she’d shrugged—what did she know? No one spoke his name after his death. Either way, it means that everywhere I turn, there he is. Just like Jaxon. Both of them in our friendship circle but not. Both of them watching me with eyes that appear blank on the surface but hold a multitude of emotions underneath. Waiting on me to do or say...*something*.

“I still don’t know how I ended up mated to Hudson,” I say dully. “I thought you had to be interested in being mated, or at least ‘open’ to it, for it to happen in the first place?”

Macy grins at me. “Clearly you feel *something* for him.”

I roll my eyes. “Gratitude. I feel gratitude for him. And I’m pretty sure that’s a terrible reason to hook up.”

“So...” Macy’s eyes are positively sparkling with humor now. “You’ve thought about ‘hooking up’ with Hudson, eh?”

I throw a small decorative pillow at my cousin, who easily dodges its path and laughs. “Well, all I know is, most everyone at school would kill to find even *one* mate. You having had two since arriving is so not allowed.”

Macy’s teasing me, trying to lighten the moment, but it doesn’t help.

Hudson often sits with us at meals or in classes we share. Although most of the Order and Flint watch him warily, he’s somehow managed to woo my cousin with no more than a teasing half smile and a French vanilla latte.

In fact, she’s actually one of the few people who blames Jaxon for our mating bond being severed, and she’s let it be known she is firmly Team Hudson. I can’t help but wonder if she’s on Hudson’s side because she really thinks he’s best for me—or just that he isn’t Jaxon, the boy who insisted we challenge the Unkillable Beast, a move that ended up getting Xavier killed.

Either way, she’s right about one thing: eventually I’m going to have to deal with this mess.

I’ve been doing my best to ignore the situation a while longer, though...at

least until I have a plan. I've spent nearly all my time since Xavier's funeral trying to figure out what to do, how to fix things—between Jaxon and me, and Jaxon and Hudson, and Hudson and me—but I can't. The ground has turned to quicksand beneath me, and my wings aren't nearly as much help as you'd expect them to be... I mean, I have to land sometime, and every time I do, I start to sink.

Macy must sense my inner anguish, since she sits up on the end of her bed, her amusement fading as quickly as mine. "I know things are rough right now," she continues. "I was just teasing about the boys. You're doing your best."

"What if I don't know what to do?" The words explode out of me like I'm a bottle under pressure and Macy's just caused the first leak. "I had barely begun to deal with being a gargoye, and now I have to deal with winning a seat on the Circle of Doom and Desperation and being coronated right after graduation."

"Circle of *Doom and Desperation*?" Macy repeats with a startled laugh.

"After which I'm sure I'll be locked in a tower or beheaded or something else equally fatalistic." I say it like it's a joke, but I'm not kidding. There isn't one ounce of optimism in me about being a member of the paranormal council Jaxon and Hudson's parents head up...or anything else that comes with it. Including politics, survival, *and* being mated to Hudson instead of my *actual* boyfriend in this brave new world I've found myself in.

"I'm still in love with Jaxon. I can't change how I feel." I groan. "But I can't stand hurting Hudson, either—or the look in his eyes when we're sitting at the lunch table and he's watching me with his brother."

The whole thing is a nightmare beyond comprehension, and the fact that I haven't been able to sleep pretty much at all since I nearly died only makes everything worse. But how can I relax when every time I close my eyes, I feel Cyrus's teeth sinking into my neck and the agony of his eternal bite spreading through me? Or I remember Hudson placing me in a shallow grave and burying me alive (still not ready to ask how he knew to do that)? Or worse—and yes, this is actually worse—I see the look on Jaxon's face when Hudson told him I am his mate?

Memories so devastating, all I want to do is run away and hide.

"Hey, everything is going to be okay," Macy says, voice tentative but eyes concerned.

"Okay' might be a stretch." I roll over so that I'm staring at the ceiling,



but I barely see it. Instead, all I see are *their* eyes.

One dark pair, one light.

Both tormented.

Both waiting for something I don't know how to give them and an answer I don't even know how to begin to find.

I know what I feel. I love Jaxon.

And Hudson, well, that's more complicated. Not love, which I'm worried is not what he wants to hear. Yes, my pulse races when he's near, but objectively, the guy is next-level gorgeous. Any person in their right mind would be attracted to him. Plus, there's now this mating bond between us that is causing me to feel things that aren't really there as well. At least not that I want them to be.

After everything he did for me, after the bond I realize we built over those weeks trapped together, I don't want to disappoint him and tell him I don't feel more than friendship for him.

I groan again. There I go, assuming Hudson even wants to be mated to me. He might be as mad at the universe as I am for putting us in this awkward situation.

Macy lets out a long sigh, then climbs off her bed and settles onto the end of mine. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push."

"Your pushing isn't what upset me. It's just..." I trail off, not sure how to vocalize the confusion roiling around inside me.

"Everything?" She fills in the blank I left, and I nod, because yeah, everything is a hell of a lot.

Silence stretches between us, long and uncomfortable. I wait for Macy to give up, to go back to her own bed and forget about this dumpster fire of a conversation, but she doesn't move. Instead, she leans back against the wall and watches me with a calm patience that isn't exactly her normal *modus operandi*.

I'm not sure if it's the silence or the way she's watching me or the need to spill my guts that's been building all day, but the tension ratchets higher and higher until finally I blurt out the truth I've been trying to hide from everyone, even myself. "I really, really don't think I'm strong enough to do this."

I don't know exactly what reaction I expect Macy to have to my confession—in a split second I imagine everything from her lavishing sympathy on me to her telling me to *suck it up, buttercup* with a hard edge that has nothing

to do with me and everything to do with how things are going pretty awful for her, too.

In the end, though, she does the one thing I don't expect. The one thing I've never even *considered*. She bursts out laughing. "Well, no shit, Sherlock. I'd be worried if you actually thought you *could* deal with all of this on your own."

"Really?" I'm flummoxed. And maybe a little insulted—does she really think I'm so incompetent? Just because *I* know I'm a mess doesn't mean I want everyone else to know, too. "Why?"

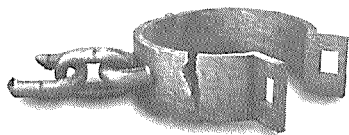
"Because you're *not* alone, and you don't have to go it alone. That's what I'm here for. That's what all of us are here for—especially your boyfriends."

I narrow my eyes at her plural use of the word—and the emphasis she put on it. "Boyfriend," I correct, stressing the hard *d* on the end. "One, not two." I hold up my index finger just to make sure she gets it. "One boyfriend."

"Oh, right. One. Of course." Macy shoots me a sly look. "Sooooo, just to be clear. Which vampire is that exactly?"

## 2

## My Achy Breaky Bond



“You’re obnoxious,” I tease. “But would you mind if we focus on what really matters? Graduating high school?”

Between losing my parents, transferring schools, and missing four months while I did my best impression of a waterspout, I’m about as behind as I can get and still be a senior. Which means if I don’t finish the extra projects I’ve been assigned and pass all my finals, I’m going to be a senior again next year, too. And that is *not* acceptable, no matter how much Macy would like me to stick around another year. I mean, if Hudson can make up classes after being *dead*, for God’s sake, I can make them up, too.

“You know that’s the real reason I’m burying my head, don’t you?” I finally admit. “Because there’s no way I can deal with the ridiculous amount of work I have to make up *and* try to figure out what to do about Cyrus or the Circle or—”

“Your mate?” Macy smiles ruefully and holds up a hand before I can protest. “Sorry, couldn’t resist. But you’re right, as much as I’d wish it otherwise, you seem to really want to graduate.” She walks over and grabs her laptop off her desk. “So, as your self-appointed best friend, it’s up to me to make sure that happens. You’ve got a presentation due for Dr. Veracruz’s class on magical history, right? I heard some other seniors talking about it.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Everyone had to pick a subject discussed in class this year, then write and present a ten-page paper about some aspect of that topic we didn’t have time to go over. She says it’s so that we all get a more well-rounded knowledge of the different parts of history, but I think she’s just trying to torture us.”

Macy climbs back on her bed and types something on her laptop. “I know just the topic for you to research!”

"Oh yeah?" I ask, rolling over and sitting up.

"Yes," she says. "You guys discussed mating bonds, right? I've been dying to take this class just for that reason. Well, you're a walking example of something not discussed in class."

I shake my head. "Unfortunately, I missed that lecture, but Flint told me it's possible to be mated to more than one person in your lifetime. I'm not the only person to ever have more than one mate."

Macy pauses her typing and looks up at me, one brow arched. "Yes, but you're the only one to ever have a mating bond severed by something other than death."

"It's never happened to anyone else?" I repeat, my heart pounding in my chest. "Really?" It seems so hard to believe, but also too terrible to believe. If no one has ever experienced this before, how are we going to fix it? What are we going to do? And why, why, *why* did it happen to Jaxon and me?

"No one," Macy reiterates. "Mating bonds never break, Grace. They just don't. They can't. It's a law of nature or something." She pauses and looks down at her hands resting on her keyboard. "Except, somehow, yours did."

Like I really need to be reminded of that.

Like I wasn't there.

Like I didn't feel it snap with a force that nearly tore me in half, a force that nearly destroyed me...and Jaxon.

"Never?" I must have misheard that part. Surely I'm not the only one.

"Never," Macy insists, deliberately enunciating each syllable even as she looks at me like I've suddenly grown three heads. "Not kind of never, Grace. Not almost never. *Never* never. Like *never in the history of our species* never. Mating bonds *cannot* be broken while mates are alive. Ever." She shakes her head for emphasis. "I mean never. Ever. Nev—"

"Okay, okay. I get it." I shake my head in surrender. "Mating bonds never break. Except Jaxon's and mine *did* break and neither of us is dead, so..."

"Yeah," she agrees with a frown. "We're in totally uncharted territory here. It's no wonder you feel so messed up. You *are* messed up."

"Wow. Thanks for that." I pretend to pull a dagger out of my heart.

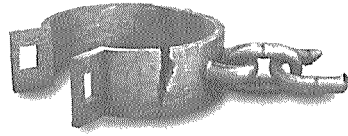
But Macy just makes a face at me. "You know what I mean."

"I do," I agree. "But there's one part of this whole thing I just can't figure out. I've been thinking about it for days, and it's why I'm so skeptical about the whole *this never happens* thing. I—"

“Never,” she interrupts, waving her hands around for emphasis. “It literally *never* happens.”

I hold up a hand again to get her to pause, because I’m really trying to work toward a point here. “But if that’s true, and mating bonds *never* break, why exactly was there a spell to break mine? And how did the Bloodletter just happen to know it?”

## Keep Calm and Wingo On



“Hey, do you know what’s for dinner tonight?” I ask as Macy and I make our way down the dragon-sconce-lit hallways to the cafeteria. We both worked up a massive appetite researching mating bonds for the last three hours—although no closer to discovering someone else whose bond had been severed or any mention of a spell to do it. “I forgot to check.”

“Whatever it is, it will be terrible.” She makes a disgusted face and sighs. “It’s one of the bad Wednesdays.”

“Bad Wednesdays?” I should probably know what she means, considering I’ve been eating in the dining hall nearly every day for the last three weeks, but I’ve been more than a little preoccupied. Most days, I’m lucky if I can remember to wear my uniform, let alone what the cafeteria is serving...well, except for waffle Thursdays. Those are indelibly imprinted in my brain.

Macy gives me the side-eye as we head down the stairs. “Let’s just say I suggest the frozen yogurt—and maybe a dinner roll, *if you’re feeling brave*.”

“Frozen yogurt? Seriously? How bad could it be? The kitchen witches are awesome.” I mean, what could they possibly serve to engender this kind of disgust in my cousin? Eye of newt? Toe of frog?

“The witches *are* awesome,” she agrees. “But one Wednesday a month, the witches take off early for Wingo nights. And tonight is one of those nights.”

“Wingo nights?” I repeat, completely mystified even as my imagination conjures up images of witches with giant raven wings flying around the top of the castle. Then again, how would I have missed that?

Macy looks shocked that I haven’t heard of whatever this ritual is. “It’s a witchy version of bingo. I can’t wait till I’m old enough to play.”

“Old enough to play?” I rack my brain trying to figure out what sort of bingo the kitchen witches might play that would be adults only.

“Yes!” Macy’s face lights up. “It’s like bingo, but every time they call a

number on your card, you have to do a shot from whatever potions they're serving that night. Some make you dance like a chicken, others turn your clothes inside out... Last month, they even had one that made them walk the entire room roaring like a T. rex."

She laughs. "Let's just say, when you finally score a bingo and win, you've totally earned it. The kitchen witches are addicted, even though Marjorie always wins, since she's such a drama queen. Which then becomes a whole thing on its own because Serafina and Felicity accuse her of charming the balls—"

"Exactly whose balls are you charming?" Flint asks as all six-foot-whatever of him pops up behind us. As per usual, he's got a huge grin on his handsome face and mischief in his amber eyes. "I'm only asking because I'm pretty sure it's against the rules."

"Don't you start, too," Macy says with a grin and a shake of her head. "I was *talking* about Wingo and how the kitchen witches get their wands in a twist over—"

"Wingo?" He stops dead at the bottom of the stairs, his easy smile replaced by a look of horror. "Tell me it's not Wingo night already?"

Macy sighs. "I wish I could."

"You know what? I'm really not that hungry," Flint starts to back away. "I think I'll—"

"Oh, no. You're not getting out of it that easily." Macy loops her arm through his and starts tugging him forward. "If the rest of us have to suffer, so do you."

Flint grumbles, but Macy just propels him along even as she agrees with him.

The two of them whine the whole rest of the way, until finally I say, "Nothing can be this bad. Heck, I survived public school cafeterias, where frozen yogurt wasn't an option even on the good days."

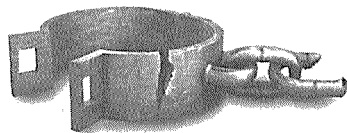
"Oh, it's that bad," Macy answers.

"Actually, it's worse," Flint warns me.

"How? How could it actually be worse? I mean, who's doing the cooking?"

They give me identical looks of horror as they both answer at the same time. "The vampires."

## Wednesday, Bloody Wednesday



“The vampires?” Not going to lie. I recoil a little as I think about what Jaxon—and Hudson—eat.

“Exactly,” Flint tells me with a disgusted face. “Why Foster decided to put the vampires in charge on the kitchen witches’ day off, I’ll never know.”

“Who should have been in charge?” Mekhi asks as he walks up behind Macy. “The dragons? Roasted marshmallows only get most of the student body so far.”

“At least marshmallows are food,” Flint tells him as he pulls open one of the dining hall doors with a flourish, then gestures for me to go inside.

“Blood cake is food,” Mekhi shoots back. “Or so I’ve been told.”

“Blood cake?” My stomach turns over nervously. I have no idea what that is, but it sounds scary.

Flint shoots Mekhi a smug look. “How are those dragon-roasted marshmallows sounding now, Grace?”

“Like dinner, if I can add a pack of cherry Pop-Tarts.” I glance around the dining hall, checking to see if the à la carte snack table from breakfast and lunch is still out. But, typical of all the other dinnertimes, it’s nowhere to be seen.

“It won’t be that bad, I swear,” Mekhi says as he starts shepherding us toward the food line.

“How can I have been at Katmere this long and not known about Wingo night?” I wonder, even as a part of my brain is cataloging every dish I’ve ever heard of with blood in it—which, to be honest, isn’t that many. The other part of my brain is busy checking out the cafeteria, trying to spot Jaxon... or Hudson.

I don’t know if I’m worried or relieved when I can’t find either of them.

“Because you’ve never been around this many weeks in a row before,”



Macy answers. "And I think the last time one of these rolled around, Jaxon was feeding you tacos in the library."

My mind boggles a little at the thought that that night in the library was only a month ago. So much has changed since then that it feels like it happened several months ago. Maybe even years.

"I wish I was eating tacos in the library right now," Flint grumbles as he grabs a couple of trays and holds them out for Macy and me.

Macy takes the offering with a sigh. "Yeah, me too."

"Don't listen to them," Mekhi tells me. "It's not that bad."

"You don't eat, so you don't get a vote," Flint says.

Mekhi just laughs. "Fair point. I'm going to grab a drink, and then I'll find us a table." He winks at Macy, then heads toward the big orange sports coolers against the back wall of the dining hall.

The line is shorter than usual—I wonder why—and moves pretty fast, so it only takes a couple of minutes before we're standing in front of Katmere's elegant buffet tables. Usually they are overflowing with food, but tonight the offerings are pretty slim. And none of them is particularly tempting to me.

Even the salad bar is gone, in its place a giant cauldron of soup that has vegetables floating in it, along with a bunch of dark-brown cubes I don't recognize. "What are those things?" I whisper to Macy as we pass by several adult vampires—including Marise, who smiles at me and waves.

I wave back but keep moving down the line as Macy whispers, "Coagulated blood."

We pass a black sausage that I don't even have to ask about—I've seen enough British cooking shows to know what gives the sausage its distinctive coloring. And to be fair, a lot of people love it. But I don't know...the whole vampire thing makes it feel really weird. Like, how do we know for sure that they're using animal blood and not human blood, since at least some of the vamp teachers here are totally old-school?

Just the thought has my stomach turning queasy. But up ahead is a huge pile of pancakes, and I've never been more relieved in my life to have breakfast for dinner. At least until I get closer and realize that these aren't ordinary pancakes. They're a really deep, dark reddish-purple.

"Tell me they didn't actually put blood in the pancakes," I say.

"They totally put blood in the pancakes," Macy answers.

"It's a Swedish recipe," Flint tells me "Blodplättar. And they're actually

pretty good.” He reaches over and puts several on his plate.

The vamps are watching the line closely, so I grab one of the pancakes. They obviously worked hard on dinner, and the last thing I want to do is hurt anyone’s feelings. Besides, the frozen yogurt station is on the way to the table...

After dousing my pancake in syrup and filling up a bowl with a mix of vanilla and chocolate yogurt and all the toppings it can hold, I follow Flint and Macy through the crowded dining hall to the table Mekhi chose. Eden and Gwen have already joined him, and I can’t help grinning when I read the front of Eden’s newest purple hoodie: *For The Hoard*.

She sees me smiling and winks, right before she reaches over and snags the cherry off the top of Macy’s frozen yogurt sundae.

Macy just laughs. “I knew you were going to do that.” She reaches in and grabs another cherry. “That’s why I got two.”

Quick as lightning, Eden snatches that one as well. “You should know by now never to trust a dragon with your treasure.”

“Hey!” Macy pouts while the rest of us laugh. But once we’re settled, I spoon a couple of the half dozen cherries from my bowl into hers. If being at Katmere has taught me nothing else, it’s the value of being prepared for anything.

“Best. Cousin. Ever.” Macy beams at me, and I realize it’s the first real smile I’ve seen from her since Xavier died. It makes me breathe a tiny bit easier, makes me think that, while happy is a stretch, maybe she’s beginning to find her way back to being at least okay.

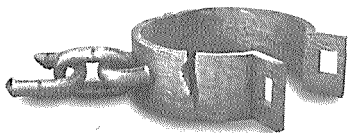
Conversation flows around me, talk of senior projects and finals and gossip about classmates I don’t know, as I dig into my frozen yogurt. I’m trying to pay attention, but it’s hard when I keep looking around for Jaxon and Hudson. Which is ridiculous, I know. Half an hour ago in my room, I was all *I don’t have time to worry about them*, and now I can’t stop scanning the dining hall for one, or both.

But I can’t help it. No matter how out of control things are today, I can’t just turn my feelings on and off. I love Jaxon. I’m friends with Hudson. I’m worried about them both, and I need to know they’re fine, especially since I haven’t had the chance to talk to either of them about everything going on.

I’m halfway through my frozen yogurt when a hush comes over the dining hall, right about the time the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I look to see everyone staring at something behind me and I know—even before I turn around—who I’m going to find.

## 5

## Stale Mate



Macy, who has already turned around to see what all the fuss is about, elbows me in the side and hisses Jaxon's name out of the corner of her mouth.

I nod to let her know I've heard her, but I don't move. I hold my breath, though, as the shivers running up and down my spine warn me that he's getting closer...and his attention is focused entirely on me.

Macy squeaks, which tells me everything I need to know about what mood he's in. She's relaxed around him a lot in the last few weeks—friendship will do that—but it doesn't mean she's forgotten how dangerous he is. And neither has anyone else, apparently. It's reflected in the faces of every single person around me, in the way they all seem frozen, like they're just waiting for Jaxon to strike...and want to make damn sure that they aren't the one he goes after.

Even Flint is sitting back in his chair, both his pancakes and his conversation with Eden about their physics final forgotten, as he looks right past me. The look in his gaze is a combination of wary and reckless, and it's worry over Flint—over what he's feeling and what he might do—that has me turning around before things go to absolute shit around me.

I'm not the least bit surprised to find Jaxon behind me. I am, however, surprised at just how close he really is. A few weeks ago, there's no way he'd have been able to get within a few inches of me without my entire body going haywire. All I've got now is this shiver down my spine, and it's not exactly a good feeling.

After dinner last night, he'd invited me back to his tower to study, but I couldn't go, since Hudson had already asked me to study with him. I get frustrated just thinking of the mess that ensued, since neither of the Vega brothers could be adults about the situation and let us all study together.

I'd ended up studying in my room, alone. And not learning a damn thing

because I was too busy being pissed at them.

But then I texted Jaxon twice today, and he hasn't so much as acknowledged I exist. I get that he doesn't like my friendship with Hudson—but he has to know that's all it is. Friendship. I apparently have no choice in who I'm mated to, but I've shown Jaxon in a thousand different ways that he's who I choose to love.

Which is why I'm so annoyed by the cold shoulder he's given me all day.

He must feel the same way, because his dark eyes are as cold as midnight.

As cold as Denali's summit in January.

As cold as they were the very first time we met. No. Colder.

For what feels like forever, he doesn't say anything and neither do I. Instead, the silence stretches thin as ice—between us and around us—until Luca finally steps out from behind him and asks, “Mind if we sit with you guys?”

For the first time, I realize the entire Order is here. I've grown used to eating with Jaxon and Mekhi a few times a week, obviously, but it's rare for all of Jaxon's friends to join us. Yet here they are—Luca, Byron, Rafael, Liam, all lined up behind Jaxon like they're expecting an attack.

“Of course.” I gesture to the empty seats scattered around the table, but Luca isn't asking me. His gaze is laser focused on Flint. Who, it turns out, is looking right back, a slight flush on his brown cheeks.

And wow, this is a development I did not see coming. But one I am absolutely here for.

A glance at Eden tells me she's watching the whole thing as intently as I am, and the smile on her face makes me wonder if maybe I was wrong about who Flint has been in love with. I thought he meant Jaxon that day on the Ludares field, but maybe he meant Luca all along? Or maybe Luca was the new guy he was referring to? Since our talk, Flint hasn't mentioned his love life again, and I didn't feel it was fair to question him about it, either.

But whatever he was getting at that day, it's obvious—right now at least—he is definitely interested in Luca. Who, apparently, is interested right back.

Flint nods, and Luca crosses over to sit next to him. Before I can even think about where Jaxon is going to sit, Macy has scooted her chair closer to Eden's, creating an obviously empty space for someone to sit beside me. Jaxon nods his thanks, and seconds later, he's pulled a chair from another table and is sliding in right next to me.

My heart jumps as his thigh grazes mine, and he grins just a little. Shoots me a look out of the corner of his eye I'd recognize anywhere. Then very slowly, very deliberately, does it again.

This time, my breath catches in my throat, because this is Jaxon. My Jaxon. And though our relationship hasn't felt the same since the challenge, and though I'm so confused I can barely think, I still want him. I still love him.

"How was your day?" he asks softly.

I shake my head as the state of my grades, and the precariousness of my graduating, comes back to me. "So bad that I don't want to talk about it."

I don't mention that him not answering my texts only made the day worse. I can tell from the look in his eyes that he already knows it. And that he doesn't like this mess any more than I do.

"How—" My voice breaks, so I clear my throat and try again. "How about you? How was your day?"

He makes a face, shoves his hand through his silky black hair hard enough to reveal the jagged scar on his left cheek. The scar the vampire queen Delilah—his mother—gave him for murdering her firstborn son. Who is now back. And is now my mate, even though I am still in love with my old mate whose bond with me should never have been able to be broken.

Just thinking about it makes my head hurt.

Talk about a soap opera. I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried.

"Pretty much the same," he finally answers.

"Yeah, I figured."

He doesn't offer anything else, and neither do I. Around us, the conversation ebbs and flows, but I can't think of a single thing to say to break his stony silence. It feels strange to be this awkward with Jaxon, when we used to talk for hours about anything. About everything.

I hate it so much, especially watching how easy everyone else is with one another. Eden and Mekhi are laughing together, and so are Macy and Rafael. Byron and Liam are talking intensely about something, and Flint and Luca... Well, Flint and Luca are definitely flirting, while Jaxon and I can barely look at each other.

I start to take another bite of my frozen yogurt but realize I've lost my appetite before I so much as get the spoon to my mouth. I drop it back in the bowl and decide: fuck it. If things are so weird that I can't eat, I might as well go to the library.

Jaxon must sense my unease, though, because just as I'm about to get up, he slides his hand over mine. It feels so familiar, so good, that I automatically turn mine over to lace our fingers together even though I'm still annoyed with him.

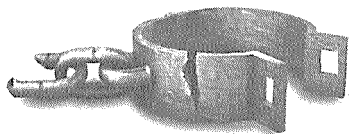
He kisses my fingers before placing our joined hands onto his leg under the table, and a shiver of awareness runs through me. It's moments like these, when we're touching, that I think maybe we still have a chance. Maybe everything isn't as screwed up as it seems. Maybe there really is hope.

I'm pretty sure he feels the same way, judging by the grip he has on my hand. And the fact that he doesn't say anything to break the comfortable silence between us, almost as if he's as afraid as I am to ruin this moment. So we just sit there, soaking in the conversations going on around us. It works, too, at least for a little while.

And then it happens—every nerve in my body goes on red alert.

I don't need to turn around to know Hudson has just walked into the cafeteria, but the way Jaxon's hand tightens on mine gives me all the added confirmation I need.

## 6

A Tale of  
Two Vegas

A second later, it's like everyone notices him at once. Each person at the table stills as if holding their collective breath even as their eyes dart everywhere—except toward Jaxon and me. Well, everyone except Macy, who's waving like she's trying to flag down a bush plane in a snowstorm. And that's *before* she slides her chair down to make room for him to join us, moving so far that she's practically in Eden's lap.

Hudson murmurs a quick “thanks” even as he grabs a chair and plops his tray down next to Macy. There are four slices of cheesecake on it, along with his usual tumbler of blood.

Macy grins even wider, grabbing one of the plates. “Awww, you shouldn't have.”

“I heard it was Wingo night. Thought you might appreciate some of the leftovers,” Hudson says to Macy, but his eyes never leave mine, except for the one brief moment where he tracks the fact that both Jaxon and I have a hand under the table. And even though I know he can't see us touching, I feel like I've been caught doing something wrong. Jaxon must sense my sudden discomfort because he pulls his hand from mine and folds both of his on top of the table.

Hudson doesn't say anything to either of us. Instead, he turns to my cousin like he didn't even notice us holding hands and asks, “Anyone up for chess later?”

The two of them have been playing chess a couple of times a week. I think Hudson asked her to play with him the first time to take her mind off Xavier, and she accepted because she felt bad that everyone gave him such a wide berth. But lately, I've caught her googling chess moves when she thinks I'm not looking, and I know she's started to really enjoy their friendship.

“You better believe it,” she replies around a mouthful of cheesecake.

“One of these days, I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Pretty sure you’re going to have to remember how to move your knight first,” he shoots back.

“Hey, it’s complicated,” she tells him.

“Waaaaay harder than checkers,” Eden teases her even as she steals a bite of Macy’s cheesecake.

“It is!” Macy pouts. “Every piece does something different.”

“I’ll play with you, Macy,” Mekhi calls from his spot at the end of the table. “Hudson’s not the only master strategist at the table.”

“No, but I am the only one with my own chess table,” Hudson tells him.

Eden snorts. “Not sure that’s something to brag about, Destructo Boy.”

“You’re just jealous, Lightning Girl.”

“Damn straight.” She grins. “I want to be able to blow shit up with just a wave of my hand.”

He lifts a brow. “You mean you can’t?”

She just laughs and rolls her eyes.

“Hey, Hudson, hit me up, man,” Flint calls from the other end of the table.

Hudson glances at Macy, who shrugs, before he slides a piece of cheesecake down the table to Flint.

Flint nods his thanks before shoving a huge bite in his mouth. Luca smiles fondly at him before gesturing to the book Hudson put down next to his tray. “What are you reading now?” he asks.

Hudson holds up the book. “*A Lesson Before Dying*.”

“A little late for that, isn’t it?” Flint asks, and after a shocked pause, everyone cracks up. Especially Hudson.

I want to say something to him—I read that book junior year and loved it—but it feels weird to join in a conversation I’m obviously not included in. Hudson has talked to everyone at the table—everyone—except Jaxon and me. Which isn’t awkward at all.

Especially not when the conversation continues to go on around us. Every time Flint says something funny, Hudson’s eyes meet mine like he wants to share the joke...then they dart away like he thinks we aren’t supposed to do that anymore. I hate it, just like I hate the weirdness that keeps growing between us. Hudson has done nothing to make me feel guilty for being in love with his brother—in fact, just the opposite. But us being mates (and that Jaxon and I used to be) hangs in the air between us like a bomb about to go off.



Add in the way Rafael and Liam keep staring him down because they can't seem to let go of the past and the way Flint blows hot and cold depending on his mood, and I can't help thinking Hudson would rather be anywhere but here. But he comes back, every day. He keeps trying, every day, because he wants things *not* to be awkward between us.

Unlike me, who won't even talk to him when Jaxon is nearby.

Suddenly, it's all too much, and I tell no one in particular that I need to go study.

God knows I've got more than enough work these days to keep me busy.

But when I push away from the table, Jaxon pushes away, too. "Can I talk to you?" he asks.

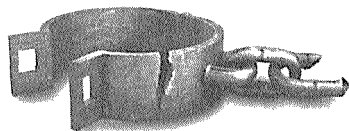
I want to laugh, want to ask what he could possibly have to say to me when he's spent the last ten minutes doing anything *but* speaking to me.

I don't, though.

Instead, I nod and avoid making eye contact with Hudson while I send the group what I know is a really fake-looking smile. Jaxon doesn't even bother doing that before he turns and heads for the door.

I follow him—of course I do. Because I'd follow Jaxon anywhere. And I can't deny the tiny part of me that hopes he's finally ready to discuss how we can make this work.

## I Think I Missed the Punch Line



I expect Jaxon to stop right outside the cafeteria doors and say whatever it is that he wants to say. But I should have known better—he's not exactly into public displays of anything. So when he starts down the hall after holding the door for me, I figure we're going to his tower.

But he turns at the last second, and instead of going up the staircase that leads to his room, he takes me up the one that leads to mine.

The lump in my throat is beginning to feel like a bad B movie, except instead of *The Tomato That Ate Cleveland*, it's *The Sadness That Swallowed a Girl, a Gargoyle, and an Entire Fucking Mountain*. We always go to his room—for serious talks, to hang out, to *make* out. That he isn't taking me there now tells me everything I need to know about how this conversation is going to go.

Once we get to my room, I open the door and walk in, expecting Jaxon to follow me. Instead, he stands on the other side of Macy's beaded curtain, a look of uncertainty on his haggard but beautiful face for the first time in who knows how long.

"You know you're always welcome in my room." I force the words out of my too-tight throat and try to pretend like I'm not choking on them. On everything. "Nothing's changed."

"Everything's changed," he counters.

"Yeah," I admit even though everything inside me wants to deny it. "I guess it has."

My breathing turns ragged as a giant stone starts pressing down on my chest—one that has nothing to do with me being a gargoyle and everything to do with the panic churning inside me—and I turn away from him, try to gasp for breath without being too obvious.

But Jaxon knows me better than I want him to, and suddenly he's standing

in front of me, his big, steady hands holding my own as he tells me, “Breathe with me, Grace.”

I can’t. I can’t inhale. I can’t talk. I can’t do anything but stand here and feel like I’m suffocating.

Like the floor is moving beneath my feet and the walls around me are caving in.

Like my own body has turned against me, bent on destroying me as surely as the outside forces I’m growing so tired of struggling against.

“In—” He sucks in a long, deep breath and holds it for a second. “And out.” He breathes out, slow and steady. When I do nothing but stare at him with wild eyes, his grip on my hands gets firmer. “Come on, Grace. In—” He takes another breath.

The breath I take in response is nowhere as deep, nowhere as steady—I’m actually pretty sure I sound like I’m choking on a blood pancake—but it’s still a breath. Oxygen rushes into my lungs.

“That’s it,” he says, and now his hands are rubbing up and down my arms, my shoulders. It’s meant to be comforting—and it is—but it’s also devastating, because it doesn’t feel like it’s supposed to. It doesn’t feel like Jaxon, my Jaxon, is touching me, at least not like it used to.

It’s not fast and it’s not easy, but eventually I get the panic attack under control. When it’s over, when I can finally breathe again, I drop my forehead onto Jaxon’s chest. His arms go around me automatically, and it isn’t long before my arms slide around his waist as well.

I don’t know how long we stand like that, holding each other but also letting each other go. It hurts more than I ever imagined it would.

“I’m sorry,” he says as he finally releases me. “I’m so sorry, Grace.”

I fight the urge to cling to him, to keep my body pressed against his for as long as I can. “It’s not your fault,” I tell him softly.

“Not about the panic attack—though I’m sorry about that, too.” He thrusts a hand into his hair, and for the first time tonight, I can see his whole face in stark definition. He looks terrible—lost and tormented and in as much pain as I am. Maybe even more. “I’m sorry about all of this. If I could take back that one careless act, that one moment of utter selfishness and naivete, I would do it in a heartbeat. But I can’t, and now...” This time it’s his breath that sounds shaky. “And now, we’re here, and I can’t do a fucking thing about any of it.”

“We’ll get through it. It’s just going to take some time—”

"It's not that easy." He shakes his head even as his jaw works furiously. "Maybe we'll get through it; maybe we won't. But look at you, Grace. It's hurting you being like this, giving you panic attacks."

He pauses, swallows convulsively. "*I'm* hurting you, and that's the last thing I ever wanted to do."

"So don't." It's my turn to reach out and grab on to him. "Don't do this. Please."

"It's already been done. That's what I'm trying to tell you. This, what we're feeling now...it's just the phantom pain after you've lost a limb. It still hurts, but there's nothing there. And there never will be again...at least not if we keep on like this."

"That's all we are to you?" I ask, pain slamming through me like a sledgehammer. "Just something that used to matter?"

"You're everything to me, Grace. You have been from the moment I first laid eyes on you. But this isn't working. It hurts too much. For all of us."

"It hurts now, but it doesn't have to be like this. Our mating bond broke. But that just means mine with Hudson can break, too—"

"Do you think that's what I want?" he demands. "I've lived two hundred years, and this is the worst pain I've ever felt in my life. Do you think I would wish that on you? On Hudson?"

His voice thickens, but he shakes his head. Clears his throat. Takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly before continuing. "Every time he sees us together...I know he's hurting."

I shake my head. "You're wrong, Jaxon. I told you. We're just friends, and Hudson is fine with that."

"You don't see him when you walk away," Jaxon insists. "I killed my brother once, because I was arrogant and childish and thought it was the right thing—the only thing—to do. I won't do it again, not like this. I won't hurt him, and I won't hurt you."

"What about you?" I ask, even as the pain radiates through me. "What happens to you in all this?"

"It doesn't matter—"

"It *does* matter!" I shoot back. "It matters to me."

"This is my fault, Grace. All of it. I'm the asshole who loaded the gun, and I'm the asshole who threw the loaded gun in the trash. The fact that I got shot is no one's fault but my own."

“So that’s it?” I ask him on a shaky breath. “We’re breaking up, and I don’t even get a vote?”

“You had a vote, Grace, and you chose—” His voice gives out, leaving the ghost of what he was going to say hanging between us.

“But I didn’t!” I try to explain, the words coming out on broken sobs. “I don’t love him, Jaxon. Not like I love you.”

“You will,” he says, and I know it costs him dearly. “Mating bonds can snap into place when two people first meet, before they even know each other’s names. Look at how it happened between us. But the magic knows. You just have to have faith. Something I should have done.”

I look away, look down—look anywhere but at Jaxon as my heart cracks wide open—but he’s not having it. Instead of backing away like I’m desperate for him to do, he slides a finger under my chin and tilts my head up until I can’t do anything but look into his dark and heartbroken eyes.

“I am sorry that I didn’t hold on to us with every ounce of strength I had,” he tells me in a voice so hoarse, I barely recognize it as his. “I’d do anything to spare you this. Do anything to have my mate back.”

I want to tell him that I’m right here—that I’ll always be right here—but we’d both know it’s a lie. The chasm between us keeps growing, and I’m terrified that one day, neither of us will be able to find a way to jump across it.

Tears bloom in my eyes at the thought, and I blink furiously, determined not to let him see me cry. Determined not to make this any worse—for either of us. So instead of sobbing like I want to, I do the only thing I can think of to make this okay...or at least better.

I whisper, “You never did tell me the punch line to that joke.”

He looks at me, baffled. Or maybe like he can’t believe that I’m bringing up something so ridiculous at a time like this. But Jaxon’s and my relationship has been fraught with so many emotions, good and bad, that I don’t want it to end like this.

So I force myself to smile just a little bit wider and continue. “What did the pirate say when he turned eighty?”

“Oh, right.” Jaxon’s laugh is a little watery, but it’s still a laugh so I count it as a win. Especially when he answers, “He says, ‘Aye matey.’”

I stare at him for a second, openmouthed, before shaking my head. “Wow.”

“Doesn’t seem worth the wait, does it?”

There’s so much to unpack in that statement, but right now I’m out of

energy, so I just concentrate on the joke. “That’s really bad.”

“I know, right?”

His smile is small but there, and I find myself wanting to hold on to it a little longer. Maybe that’s why I shake my head and say, “So, so, soooooooo bad.”

He lifts a brow, and not going to lie, my knees tremble just a little, even though they don’t have the right to anymore. “You think you can do better?” he asks.

“I know I can do better. Why is Cinderella bad at sports?”

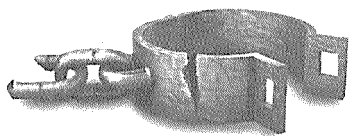
He shakes his head. “I don’t know. Why?”

I start to answer, “Because she always—” but Jaxon cuts me off before I can deliver the punch line, his mouth slamming down on mine with all the power of the pent-up sorrow and frustration and need that still seethes between us.

I gasp and reach for him, my fingers aching to bury themselves in his hair one last time. But he’s already gone, the sound of the door slamming behind him the only sign that he was here at all.

At least until the tears start to roll—silent and steady—down my cheeks.

## 8



## Ghosts Don't Need Moving Vans and Neither Does My Baggage

I spend the week after Jaxon breaks up with me making every excuse I can think of not to leave my room except for class and food. I don't want to chance running into him, can't stand the way I'm blindsided by pain every time I so much as catch a glimpse of him in the halls.

The Order has pretty much given up being in the cafeteria lately, which I think is Jaxon's way of giving me space. I appreciate it even as it hurts.

I've also taken to avoiding Hudson, which I know is cowardly of me when he's done nothing but try to be a friend to me. But I can't shake that comment Jaxon made about the look on Hudson's face when I turn to walk away.

I don't know if it's true or not, but I know I'm not ready to deal with it either way. Better to hide until I can think about either of the Vega brothers without wanting to curl into a ball and cry.

On the plus side, today is the first morning in a week that I haven't sobbed in the shower. I don't think that means I'm okay, but it does give me the strength to do something I should have done days ago—leave the safety of my room and brave the library. My Physics of Flight makeup project is due in a few days, and I still need to get it done.

I wait until after ten at night to go to the library, in the hopes of getting the shelves all to myself. By now, everyone in the school is well aware of the drama surrounding the Vega brothers and me, but I don't think the news of my breakup with Jaxon has made the rounds yet.

He obviously hasn't said a word and neither have I.

For a second, I think about shifting to my gargoyle form—I even go so far as to reach for the shiny platinum string deep inside me. But flying around the Alaskan wilderness isn't going to make this hurt any less, especially since turning my body to stone doesn't mean that my heart turns to stone, too.

I change into a pair of sweats and my most comfortable and faded One

Direction T-shirt, then scoop my backpack up from the floor and head out the door.

But the universe has obviously given up passively fucking with me and is now actively gunning for me, because the second I walk into the library, I can't miss that Hudson is sitting next to the window, his face buried in a copy of Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*.

It's a little too on the nose for me, but Hudson's always been a bit of a drama queen when it comes to his reading choices. For a second, I think about going over to talk to him, but I'm not exactly up for trading wits tonight. Plus, he's basically wearing an invisible NO TRESPASSING sign, so interrupting him feels...rude. Especially when he makes absolutely no attempt to so much as look at me.

With someone else, I might just think they hadn't seen me. But Hudson's a vampire, with the most acute senses on the planet. No way he doesn't know I'm here. Especially considering we're mated. Already, I can feel the invisible string stretching between us, connecting us to each other on a soul-deep level.

Again, I think about going over to say hello to him. He did save my life, after all, even though it meant taking on his evil father to do it...not to mention getting "cuffed" until graduation—which I've since learned means being forced to wear a charmed wrist cuff that prevents the use of any of his powers.

But in the end, I chicken out before I can take more than a couple of steps in his direction. I mean, yeah, we've seen each other around school and sat at the same table in the cafeteria since we were mated, but there's always been a buffer between us. We haven't actually been alone together since those minutes before the challenge when I did the spell to get him out of my head. And judging by the way he always gives me a wide berth even when our friends are around, I'm pretty sure he doesn't want alone time with me any more than I want it with him.

I end up going to sit at a table all the way at the other side of the library. Avoidance is my middle name...

Determined to ignore both him and my bruised and battered heart, I slip into a chair and pull out my laptop. Then I connect to the library's wifi so that I can log in to one of the databases that can only be accessed in this room. Less than five minutes of setup, and I'm working on my project on aerodynamics and the mechanics of flight—with an emphasis on the difference



between gargoyle and dragon wings/methods of suspension.

There is almost no research on gargoyles—considering the Unkillable Beast has been chained for centuries and I’m the only other one in existence for a thousand years, at least as far as anyone knows. Then again, I do have myself for a test subject, so there is that.

It doesn’t take long before I find my groove, and I spend nearly two hours immersed in both my research and a random playlist on Spotify. But when James Bay’s “Bad” comes on, it jerks me straight out of the article I’m reading and back into my own personal hell.

My hands shake as the lyrics slam through me like grenades. As he sings about a relationship being so broken that it can’t ever unbreak again, I can’t help but feel each word burn my soul.

I drag my earbuds out of my ears like they’ve caught fire and shove back from the table so hard that I nearly go over backward in my chair. It takes me a second to right myself, but when I do, I can’t help noticing Hudson staring at me from across the library.

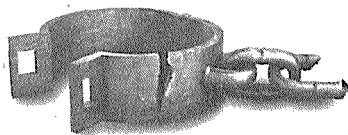
Our eyes meet and, even though the damn earbuds are halfway across the table, I can still hear the song. My breath catches in my throat, my hands tremble, and those damn tears are back in my eyes.

I tap at the screen erratically, desperate to make it stop, but I must have accidentally hit the output source button instead because now the song is playing from my phone speaker, the lyrics echoing off the walls of the otherwise silent space.

I freeze. *Shit, shit, shit.*

Suddenly, Hudson’s long, elegant fingers close over mine, and everything goes still...except the stupid song. And my even stupider heart.

## Me and My Unmentionables



Hudson doesn't say anything as he eases my phone out of my death grip. He doesn't say anything as he turns off the song and blessed silence finally fills the library again.

And he *still* doesn't say anything when he slides the phone back into my trembling hands. But his cold fingers brush against my own, and my already fucked-up heart starts to beat all fast and hard.

His blue eyes, bright and brilliant and bold—so bold—stay locked on mine for the length of several painful heartbeats. His lips move just a little, and I'm certain he's going to say something, certain he will finally break the silence that's been echoing between us for days.

But he doesn't. Instead, he turns away, heads back to his own table without so much as a word to me. And I can't take it for one more second—the silence that throbs between us like a pounding heart that suddenly forgets how to beat. “Hudson!” Like the song, my too-loud voice echoes through the thankfully nearly empty room.

He turns back with a regal lift of his brow, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his black Armani dress pants, and I can't help but smile. Only Hudson Vega—with his perfect Brit boy pompadour and even more perfect smirk—would be wearing dress pants and a dress shirt to a late-night reading sesh at the library.

His only concession to the growing lateness of the hour is the sleeves of his probably very expensive, very designer shirt, which are rolled up to the middle of his perfect forearms—which, I have to grudgingly admit, only makes him look better. Because he's Hudson and of course it does.

I realize I'm staring at him about the same time I realize he's staring back at me, that endless gaze of his burrowing into my bones. I swallow in an effort to push back the sudden nerves blooming inside me. I don't even

know why they're there.

This is Hudson, who spent weeks living inside my head.

Hudson, who saved my life and nearly destroyed our whole world to do it.

Hudson, who has somehow—despite everything—become my friend... and now my mate.

It's that word, "mate," that hangs between us. And it's that word that has nerves bubbling up inside me even as I give a small smile and say, "Thank you."

His look turns slightly mocking, but he doesn't say any of the things I can see brewing right behind his gaze. Instead, he just inclines his head in a kind of you're-welcome gesture before turning and walking away.

And just like that, my blood boils. Because seriously? Seriously? Jaxon doesn't want to be with me because he thinks Hudson is in pain, but Hudson can't even talk to me when I'm clearly upset about a damn song? I know their relationship is complicated—know this whole thing is complicated—but I'm tired of being collateral damage. I mean, who lets their friend avoid them for a week without even trying to find out why?

And just as quickly, I'm over it. Completely, 100 percent over it. Throwing my phone onto the table, I shoot after him. "Really?" I say to his broad shoulders as I chase him across the library. His long, rolling stride eats up more distance than my short-legged one does, but my annoyance gives me speed, and I catch up to him before he can sit back down.

"Really what?" he answers, and this time his gaze is watchful.

"You're not going to say anything to me?" My hands are on my hips in challenge, and I just barely fight the urge to stamp my foot. I know what I'm doing—deep down, I know. I'm angry with the world, with the universe, for doing this to all of us. For taking Jaxon from me and then taking my friendship with Hudson, too. I've been working through my grief since it happened, but last week Jaxon forced me to give up the denial I've been clinging to since our bond was broken. Now I guess I'm fully embracing stage two: anger. And I'm not even a little sad I'm misdirecting it at Hudson.

"What would you like me to say?" His crisp British accent makes the words, and the look that accompanies them, even colder.

I throw up my hands in exasperation. "I don't know. Something. Anything."

He holds my gaze for so long, I think he's going to refuse to speak. But then his mouth curves in that obnoxious smirk that's driven me wild from

the first time he showed up in my head, and he says, "You have a hole in your sweats."

"What? I don't—" I break off as I glance down and realize not only do I indeed have a sizable hole, but also that it's in a pretty embarrassing area, providing a decent glimpse of my very upper thigh. And my underwear. "Did you just do that?"

Now both brows are up. "Did I just do what?"

I gesture to my pants. "Make this hole. Obviously."

"Yes, yes I did," he answers, his expression completely deadpan. "I absolutely used my fabric-ripping superpowers to disintegrate a hole over your crotch. How did you guess?" He lifts his wrist, and the magical handcuff around it, and waves it in front of my face.

"I'm sorry." Heat floods my cheeks. "I didn't mean—"

"Sure you did." His gaze is locked on mine now. "But on the plus side, at least now I know you're wearing my favorite pair."

My blush gets about a thousand times worse as it registers what he's referring to, that I'm wearing the black lace underwear that he'd dangled from his shoe in the laundry room what feels like a year ago. "Are you seriously looking at my panties right now?"

"I'm looking at you," he answers. "That my doing so means I can also see your *panties* seems like that's more on you than me."

"I can't believe this." Annoyance skitters through my embarrassment. "You ignore me for days, and now that I finally have your attention, this is what you want to talk about?"

"First of all, I believe it is *you* who has been ignoring *me*, wouldn't you say? Secondly, I'm sorry, did you have a different topic in mind? Oh, wait! Let me guess." He pretends to examine his nails. "How's dear old Jaxon doing today?"

With anyone else, I would be apologizing for avoiding them. I'd be making a joke about the panties mishap and explaining that I'm not mad at them; I'm just mad. But Hudson makes it so hard sometimes, especially when it feels like he's deliberately pushing my buttons. "Maybe you should ask him. I mean, if you can get over feeling sorry for yourself."

He stills. "Is that what you think I'm doing? Feeling sorry for myself?" Insult—and injury—drip from his words.

But that's fine with me, because I'm feeling pretty damn insulted myself.

"Oh, I don't know. Should we talk about your choice in reading material?" I glare at the book he left open on the table when he came over to help me.

For a second—just a moment—his blue eyes turn molten. Then, as quickly as it came, the heat fades away. In its place is his old too-weary-for-words, you're-a-trial-to-my-very-existence expression, and I think I'm going to scream.

Yes, I know it's his defense mechanism, know he uses it to keep anyone from getting too close. But I thought, after what happened the day of the challenge, that we were past all this.

"I was just doing a little bit of light reading."

"With a book about a guy in prison? One who's been sentenced to death for his crimes? What, was Dostoevsky a little too over-the-top for you?"

"A little too cheerful, actually."

I snort-laugh, because how can I not? It's the *most* Hudson response *ever* to what may be the most depressing book ever written. And my anger drains away, my shoulders sagging.

He doesn't laugh with me, though. In fact, he doesn't even smile. But there's a gleam in his eyes that wasn't there before when he glances over my shoulder at the table I've been sitting at for the last two hours. "What have you been working on so furiously over there?"

"My makeup physics project." I pull a face. "I need to get at least a B on it, and a B on the final, if I want to have a chance of passing the class."

"I'll let you get back to it, then," Hudson says with a dismissive nod that hurts more than I want to admit, even to myself.

"You really can't even talk to me for ten minutes?" I ask, and I hate the plaintive note in my voice, but I can't seem to do anything about it. Not today, not here, and most definitely not with him.

For long seconds, Hudson doesn't say anything. He doesn't even breathe. But eventually he sighs and tells me, "Honestly, Grace. What is there to talk about? You've obviously been avoiding me for a reason." His voice is low, and for the first time, I see the weariness on his face...as well as the hurt.

But he's not the only one who's tired, and he's definitely not the only one who is hurting. Maybe that's why my own sarcasm is on full display when I answer, "Oh, I don't know. What about that we're—"

"What?" he interrupts, even as he stalks toward me with a sudden, predatory intent that has every hair on my body standing straight up in

alarm. "What exactly are we, Grace?"

"Friends," I whisper.

"Is that what you're calling it these days?" He sneers. "Friends?"

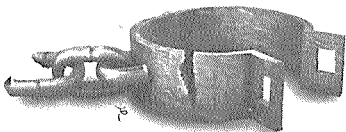
"And—" I try to give him the answer he's looking for, but my mouth is as dry and frozen as the Alaskan tundra.

"You can't even say it, can you?"

I lick my lips, swallow. Then force out the word he's clearly been waiting for. The word that's been hanging in the air between us from the moment I walked into the library, even though he never so much as acknowledged my existence. "Mates," I whisper. "We're mates."

"Yeah, we are," he answers. "And isn't that just a clusterfuck of epic proportions?"

## 10

A New Bond  
Experience

I wince.

"I don't know what it is," I answer him as honestly as I'm able.

His eyes narrow, and for the second time tonight, I'm reminded that he's not just the guy who lived in my head for a few weeks, then saved my life. He's also a dangerous predator. Not that I'm scared of him, but...the danger is definitely there.

Especially when he growls, "Don't play with me, Grace. We both know you're in love with my brother."

It's true. I do love Jaxon. But I don't say that. I don't know why I don't say it—probably for the same reason I don't tell him that Jaxon broke up with me last week. Because he'll find out soon enough, and I don't want to look pathetic when he does.

Normally, I don't care what people think of me. But he isn't people. He's Hudson, and everything inside me rebels at the idea of him feeling sorry for me. Whatever relationship we have is based on a mutual toughness and respect. I can't stand, even for a second, the idea of him thinking I need his pity.

I don't know why it matters so much with him, and to be honest, I really don't have it in me to delve into my psyche to find out. This week's been rough enough without any deep psychological revelations about myself, thank you very much.

So instead of dealing with the Jaxon statement on the table—and all the baggage that comes with it—I nod toward the towering pile of books he's got stacked in his work area. "So what have *you* been doing these last few days, besides reading every 'light' and uplifting book you can get your hands on?" It's a blatant change of subject but one I'm praying he'll go along with.

At least until he smirks at me and answers, "Mating bonds."

Okay, so maybe Jaxon was the better subject here. Trust freaking Hudson to drop the two-ton purple elephant we'd just avoided right back in the room between us—and not even bother to stand back when it falls.

Of course, he did it on purpose—to scare me off. I know Hudson, and I know he expects that revelation to make me pack up shop and run. I can see it in his eyes. More, I know how he thinks—I didn't spend weeks with him in my head not to have figured out some things. But the fact that he's trying to scare me away only ratchets my determination to stick it out, no matter how uncomfortable the topic. And it definitely makes me more determined not to do what he expects.

So instead of running back to my safe little physics project on the other side of the library, I plop myself down at his table and ask, "What about them?"

And there it is in the depths of his eyes. Surprise, yes. But also the respect he's always had for me, the respect he's always treated me with, even when we bitterly disagreed about something.

"Mostly I've been trying to figure out how they work," he says as he settles into the chair farthest away from mine on the other side of the table.

Which is an interesting choice, considering he's a badass vampire and I'm "just" a gargoyle. But it's obvious that he's wary of me. I can see it in the twist of his lips, the way he's holding himself, and how he's awkwardly looking at anything and everything but me.

But he's not backing down, either, and I can't help wondering if it's for the same reasons as me.

"I thought everyone knows how mating bonds work," I tell him.

"Yeah, well, obviously not." He taps his fingers on the table in the first display of nervousness I've ever seen from him. "We know the basics, like that they snap into place the first time people physically touch, but obviously there's a lot more to it than that or we wouldn't be in the situation we're in now."

"That can't always be true, right? I mean, ours didn't snap into place the first time we touched."

"Yes, it did," he tells me quietly. "You just didn't feel it."

"You felt it?" I repeat as shock ricochets through me. "Really?"

"Yes." There's no sarcasm in the word—or the look he gives me as he waits to see how I'll react.

"How? When?" A terrible thought occurs to me. "Did we—were we mated



during those months we spent together?" The months I'm growing more and more desperate to remember.

"No." He shakes his head. "While mating is a spiritual thing, it kicks in on the physical plane, and at that time, we weren't corporeal."

Right. Trapped together in spirit isn't enough to activate the bond. Okay, then. "So when *did* it happen?"

He's watching me closely now, and there's something in his gaze that makes my skin itch and my mouth go dry all over again.

"On the Ludaes field. You were a little busy with the near-death thing, but I felt it right away."

My eyes go wide as things slide into place, including the way Hudson turned his father's bones to dust before destroying the entire Ludaes arena with a thought. I'd overheard Macy ask him at lunch a few weeks ago why he'd destroyed the arena, and he said it was so that nothing like what happened to me there could happen to anyone else—and I still believe that played a part in it. But understanding now that he knew then that I was his mate, and he thought I was dying in his arms...I'm surprised there was anything left of the whole school when he was done.

"I'm sorry you had to find out that way," I tell him, because none of this is his fault—any more than it's my fault. Any more than it's Jaxon's, no matter what he thinks. It just is. And the sooner we accept that, the sooner we'll be able to figure out what we want. And what we're going to do to get it. "It must have been awful."

"It wasn't optimal," he admits with a twist of his mouth.

"Are you upset?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper now in the silent library.

At first, I don't think he's going to answer—he refuses to look at me, and the sudden silence between us grows more awkward with every second that passes.

Normally, I'd move on, gloss over the discomfort with easy words that defuse the situation. But instead, I force myself to ignore the awkwardness of this moment and push Hudson for an answer to the question that's been plaguing me for weeks. The question I've always been too afraid to ask.

"What exactly happened between us during the four months we were trapped together?"

## Badass Boys Are the Best Boys



His eyes go dark, and something nameless moves in their indigo depths. Something perturbed. Something painful. Something...powerless. It's strange to think of Hudson that way. Even stranger to realize that I might somehow be responsible.

But before I can wrap my head around the pain I'm seeing, let alone think of something to say about it, an underclassman approaches. I'm not sure if he's a freshman or a sophomore, but he's definitely younger than sixteen. And he is also definitely a wolf.

Which doesn't necessarily make him bad. Just because Cole and his minions were assholes doesn't mean every wolf is—look at Xavier. But I'm not sure I'm up to finding out who this kid is or what his intentions are. Not when my heart is pounding like a thunderstorm and I'm already feeling far too vulnerable.

Hudson must feel the same way—or at least sense how I'm feeling—because he's out of his chair in the blink of an eye. More, his focus on the kid is absolute, unwavering, and 100 percent predatory, so much so that the wolf's eyes go wide, and he stops dead in his tracks. And that's before Hudson growls, "You're walking away now."

"I'm walking away now," the wolf repeats, nearly stumbling over his feet in his haste to get away from us. I expect him to turn around and flee, but I forget how finely developed survival instincts are in this place. The wolf moves past us, but he doesn't take his gaze off Hudson until he's at the library's main door. And even then, he only looks away long enough to find the door handle.

He shoves the door open and flees like a pack of hellhounds is hot on his heels. As I watch him go, I can't help wondering what he saw in Hudson's eyes that made him move so fast, without so much as an attempt to stand his ground.

But when Hudson turns back to me, there's nothing there. No threat,

no anger, no promise of retribution. At the same time, whatever else I saw there a few moments ago is also gone, the anger and the pain slipping away as easily as they had come.

In their place is a blank slate, sheer as glass and about as deep.

"I thought you couldn't use your powers?" I comment as he settles back down in his chair.

The look he gives me is half amused and half affronted. "You do remember I'm a *vampire*, right?"

"What? That means your power can't be grounded? Or—" A new thought occurs to me. "Did you just persuade Uncle Finn into believing he grounded your powers?"

"And why would I do that exactly?"

"Why *wouldn't* you do that?" I shoot back. "I don't know very many people who would just hand over their abilities when they have an actual way to keep them."

"Yeah, well, I'm not most people. And in case you haven't noticed, my powers aren't exactly easy to live with. If I could get rid of them completely, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

"I don't believe you." Affront turns to indignation as he continues to stare at me, but I don't back down. Instead, I just shrug and continue. "I'm sorry, but I don't. You've got way too much power to just walk away from it. Don't forget, I know exactly how vast it is."

He lifts a brow. "Have you ever thought that it's *because* I have so much power that I'm so willing to give it up?"

"Honestly, no. You don't exactly seem the type."

He stills. "And what type is that?"

"You know, the self-sacrificing, do-gooder, save-the-world type." I widen my eyes in a deliberate *gotcha* kind of look. "Besides, if you've actually given up your ability to persuade people, how did you get that wolf to run away so quickly?"

"I already told you." His voice and expression are all smug satisfaction. "I'm a vampire."

"I have no idea what that means." Except my damp palms say otherwise.

"It means that baby wolf is quite aware this vampire could separate his arms from his body in a blink if I wanted, with or without my powers."

He looks so satisfied that I can't help taunting, "Oh yeah? You really

think you're that big and scary, huh?"

His only response is to slowly blink at me, like he can't believe I'm actually making fun of him. Or worse, *flirting* with him. Not as shocked as I am, though, when I realize that's exactly what I'm doing.

I just wish I knew where it came from. I'd definitely be lying if I said there wasn't something about the way Hudson snarled at the wolf that sent shivers straight down my spine. And not necessarily in a bad way. I clearly have a type.

Still, it doesn't mean anything—except that both my human and gargoyle side recognize and appreciate strength when they see it. Right? Hudson is my *friend*. I'm *in love* with Jaxon, breakup or no breakup. Any chemistry that is showing up between Hudson and me has to be because of the mating bond and nothing else.

I know how powerful that chemistry was with Jaxon from the very beginning—before I even knew him, let alone had fallen in love with him. Is there any reason to suspect that it would be different between Hudson and me?

Just the thought has me freaking out a little bit.

Not to mention, Hudson still hasn't answered the question I asked him before the wolf showed up, which means I'm pretty much in the dark here. I have absolutely no idea what happened between us or how he feels about me, let alone how he feels about being *mated* to me. Not that all this uncertainty isn't scary or anything...

"Scary enough," Hudson says so suddenly that I think he must be reading my mind. At least until he flashes a bit of fang, and I realize that he's responding to my previous comment.

Since just seeing the tip of his fang sends another shiver along my spine, I realize I might have a serious problem on my hands, even before he asks, "What do you want to know about those four months?"

"Anything." I take a deep breath in the hopes of calming the wild beating of my heart. "Whatever you can remember."

"I remember everything, Grace."

## 12



### Eternal Ambivalence of the Spotless Mind

“Everything?” I repeat, a little stunned at the admission.

He leans forward, and this time when he says, “Everything,” it comes out as much growl as word.

And I nearly swallow my tongue *and* my tonsils in one fell swoop.

Deep inside me, my gargoyle stirs, raising its wary head, even as I feel its stillness washing through me. I force it back, settling it down with the reassurance that I really am okay, even if I currently feel anything but.

“I remember what it was like to wake up to your incessant cheer and unwavering optimism,” he tells me hoarsely. “I was sure we were going to die locked in that place, but you were just as certain that we would survive. You refused to think any other way.”

“Really?” That kind of unbridled optimism feels foreign to me these days.

“Oh yeah. You were always coming up with someplace you wanted to take me when we got free. Certain if I could just see all the things to love in the world, I wouldn’t be evil anymore, I suppose.”

“Like where?” It sounds like I’m challenging him more than I’m asking a question, and maybe I am. Because all I can think about is how hard it must have been for him after we finally *did* make it back. First, me not even knowing he was there and then, when I did find out about him, I treated him with every ounce of suspicion I could muster.

“That little strip of Coronado you like to haunt when you’re in San Diego. You take the ferry over and then spend all afternoon checking out the art galleries before stopping at the little café on the corner to get a cup of tea and a couple of cookies the size of your palm.”

Oh my God. I hadn’t thought of that place in months, and with a handful of words, Hudson brings it back to me so clearly, I can almost taste the chocolate chips.

“What kind of cookies did I get?” I ask him, even though it’s more than obvious he’s telling the truth.

“One was chocolate chocolate chip,” he answers with a grin, and it’s the first real smile I’ve seen from him in ages. One of the only real smiles I’ve seen from him ever. It lights up his face—lights up the whole room, if I’m being honest. Even me...or maybe, especially me.

Because it’s an uncomfortable thought—an uncomfortable feeling—I ask, “What about the second cookie?” I never tell anyone about this, so I figure I’m safe.

But Hudson’s smile only gets wider. “Oatmeal raisin, which you don’t even really like. But it’s Miss Velma’s favorite, and no one ever buys them from her. She always said she was going to stop baking them, but you could see it made her sad, so you started buying one every time you went just so she would have an excuse to keep making them.”

I gasp. “I’ve never told anyone about Miss Velma’s oatmeal cookies.”

His eyes meet mine. “You told me.”

I haven’t thought of Miss Velma in months. I used to visit her at least once a week when I lived in San Diego, but then my parents died, and I just fell apart and never went back. Not even to say goodbye before I left for Alaska.

We were friends, which sounds silly considering she was just some lady who sold me cookies, but we were. Some days, I would hang around her little shop and talk to her for hours. She was the grandmother I never had, and I was a good stand-in for her grandkids, who lived halfway across the country. And then one day, I just disappeared. My stomach sinks thinking about it—thinking about her, wondering where I went.

Because I’ve had more than enough sadness lately, I force down my regrets and ask, “What else do you remember?”

For a second, I think he’s going to push—or worse, start reciting some story I told him about my parents that I don’t think I can handle tonight. But, typical of Hudson, he sees more than he should. Definitely more than I want him to.

And instead of bringing up something sentimental or sweet or sad, he rolls his eyes and says, “I remember the way you used to stand over me every morning at seven a.m. and demand that I wake up and get moving. You used to insist that we do *something* even when there was nothing to do.”

I grin a little at the slight aggravation in his words.

“So what did we do? Besides swap stories, I mean.”

There’s a long pause, and then he says, “Jumping jacks.”

So not the answer I was expecting. “Jumping jacks?” I ask. “Seriously?”

“Thousands upon thousands upon *thousands* of jumping jacks.” If his expression got any more bored, he’d be comatose.

“But how is that even possible? I mean, we didn’t actually have bodies, right?”

“You shook the whole realm when you jumped. It was completely embarrassing, but—”

“Oh my God, tell me I was not stone the whole time, was I?” I interrupt.

“You absolutely were. I tried to convince you to pick up a quieter hobby—skeet shooting, for example, or wooden clog dancing—but you were insistent. It was all about the jumping jacks.” He gives a what-could-I-do? shrug before the laugh that had been trying to force its way out finally escapes. “No, you were in your normal human body, but the marathon jumping jacks...” He winks.

“But I hate jumping jacks.”

“Yeah, me too. Now. But you know what they say about hate, right, Grace?”

He leans back in his chair and gives me a look so hot that it curls my toes and straightens my hair at the same time. “It’s just the other side of—”

“I don’t believe that.” I cut him off before he can finish the old saying about hate being only one side of a coin with love. Not because I don’t actually believe it, like I told him, but because there’s a part of me that does. And I can’t deal with that right now.

Hudson doesn’t call me on my bluff, for which I am intensely grateful. But he doesn’t just move past it, either. Instead, he stays where he is—arm draped over the back of the chair beside him and long legs splayed in front of him under the table—and watches me as the seconds tick by.

I should go—I want to go—but there’s something in his gaze that keeps me right where I am, pinned to my chair, with my stomach turning flips deep inside me.

I grow more and more uncomfortable with each second that passes, though, and finally I can’t take it anymore. I’m not ready to deal with this. With any of it. I push my chair back from the table and say, “I need to get going—”

“You want to know what else I remember?” Hudson cuts me off.

Yes. I want to know everything he remembers, want to know everything I told him so I can make sure it wasn't too much, so I can make sure I didn't give him the power to destroy me. But even more than that, I want to know everything he told *me*.

I want to know about the little boy whose brother was ripped away from him. I want to know about the father who treated him like a trained seal and used him like a weapon. I want to know about the mother who looked the other way at all the terrible things that were done to her son, but who then so easily scarred Jaxon for destroying him.

"Oh, what tangled webs we weave..."

"Stay out of my head!" I command, glaring at him. "How can you—"

"It doesn't take mind-reading powers to know what you're thinking, Grace. It's written all over your face."

"Yeah, well, I need to go."

"And here I was, just getting warmed up." He stands when I do, and the mocking tone is back in his voice when he says, "Aww, come on, Grace. Don't you want to know what I thought of your red prom dress? Or that bathing suit you wore to Mission Beach that one time?"

"Bathing suit?" I squeak out, my cheeks on fire as I realize which one he's talking about. A teeny tiny little bikini. Heather had bought it on sale at a local surf shop, then dared me to wear it. Normally, I wouldn't have taken that dare for anything, but she'd also accused me of being staid, stuck in my comfort zone, *and* flat-out chicken.

"You remember," Hudson prompts. "The purple one with all the strings. It was very"—he draws a couple of tiny little triangles in the air—"geometric."

He's teasing me, I know he is, but there's something more than just a few laughs kindling in his eyes. Something dark and dangerous and just a little bit hot.

I lick my suddenly dry lips as I struggle to get words past the giant lump in my throat. "I really did tell you everything, didn't I?"

He raises a brow. "How exactly am I supposed to know the answer to that question?"

He makes a good point, but I'm too far gone to acknowledge it now. "If you saw the bathing suit, then you saw..."

He doesn't say anything else, and he certainly doesn't fill in the blanks for me. I don't know if that's a kindness, though, or just another way to



torture me. Because there's no mistaking the heat in his eyes now, and all of a sudden, it feels like my blood is freezing and boiling at the same time. I don't know what to do, what to say—may even have forgotten how to breathe for a couple of oxygen-deprived moments—but then Hudson blinks, and the heat is gone as easily as it came.

So easily, in fact, that I wonder if I imagined it.

Especially when he smirks at me and says, "Don't worry, Grace. I'm sure you still have plenty of secrets left."

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure about that." I force myself to answer his smirk with one of my own. "Which sucks, considering I can't remember if I've ever seen you in anything besides your little Armani safety blankets." I wave an airy hand toward his shirt and pants.

He glances down at himself, then demands, "What's wrong with how I dress?"

"There's nothing *wrong* with it," I answer, and it's the truth, because no one—and I mean no one—looks hotter in a pair of Armani trousers than the vampire standing across from me. Not that I'm going to say that to him. His head is big enough already. Plus, admitting it feels like turning the corner on something I'm still not sure I want any part of, mating bond or not.

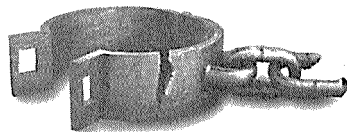
His eyes narrow dangerously. "Yeah, well, you may say that, but the look on your face says something entirely different."

"Oh yeah?" It's my turn to lift a brow as I lean in a little closer. "What exactly does the look on my face say?"

At first, I don't think he's going to answer. But then I can see something inside him shift. See something dissolve until the caution he's been wearing like a shield for the last several weeks morphs into a recklessness I don't expect from Hudson.

"It says that it doesn't matter what happened between us during those four months. It says that you're always going to want Jaxon. It says—" He pauses and leans forward until our faces are mere inches apart and my heart is beating like a wild bird in my chest. "That you won't rest until you find a way to break our mating bond."

## Antisocial Influencer



“Is that what you want?” I whisper over the sound of blood rushing in my ears. “To break the bond?”

He leans back again and asks, “Would that make you happy?”

His question stirs something inside me, something I’m not ready to face, so I turn to the anger that’s always so much easier between us. “How can I be happy when so much of my life is still a mystery? How can I be happy when you won’t even pretend to tell me the truth?”

“I have *always* told you the truth,” he snaps back. “It’s just that you’re usually too obstinate to believe it.”

“*I’m* the obstinate one?” I ask, incredulous. “Me? You’re the one who won’t give me a straight answer.”

“I’ve given you plenty of answers. You just don’t like them.”

“You’re right. I don’t like them because I don’t like getting the runaround from you. I asked you a simple question, and you can’t even—”

“There is nothing simple about the question you just asked me, and if you weren’t so busy hiding your head in the bloody sand, you would damn well know that.” Fury crackles in the depths of his eyes, and this time, when he bares his fangs, it’s scary as hell. Not scary because I would ever worry Hudson would hurt me, but scary because I realize just how much the uncertainty of our mating bond is really affecting him.

Add in his words hitting entirely too close to home, and the anger drains right out of me. Not because I don’t have a point about Hudson’s nonanswer, because I do. But because he’s got a point, too. Which means the truth is probably somewhere in the middle between us.

It’s that knowledge that has me taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly.

That has me reaching for his hand and squeezing it tightly.

That has me whispering, "You're right."

His shoulders relax, his own rage draining as easily as mine. He squeezes my hand back, his long fingers sliding between mine and holding tight, even as his face remains wary. "Why do I feel like you're trying to lull me into a false sense of security?"

I give him a rueful look. "Probably for the same reason I keep thinking you're trying to pull one over on me."

"And what reason is that?"

There's a part of me that doesn't want to answer the question, but it's the same part that regrets ever starting this conversation. But I did start it, and I did accuse Hudson of not being straight with me. Which means I need to do better, even if telling him the truth is more than a little embarrassing.

"I'm scared," I finally admit, looking anywhere and everywhere but at his ridiculously handsome face.

"Scared?" he repeats, sounding stunned. "Of me?"

"Yes, of you!" I say, my eyes darting up to his. "Of course of you. And Jaxon. And this entire situation. How can I not be? It's a mess, and whichever way it turns out, someone is going to get hurt."

"Can't you see that's what I'm trying to avoid, Grace?" He shakes his head. "I don't want to hurt you."

"So don't," I tell him. "Just be honest with me, Hudson, and I'll be honest with you."

"Honesty doesn't guarantee that you won't get hurt," he says softly.

And that's when it hits me, really hits me. Hudson is just as confused as I am.

Just as confused as Jaxon is.

I don't know why I didn't register that before. Probably because he always sounds so smooth and confident and in control, like he always knows what's happening in any given situation.

Then again, this is a situation like no other, a situation that no one I've talked to has ever even heard of before. And can I just say, I'm getting a little sick of being the test case in all these situations.

The first human at Katmere.

The first gargoyle born in a thousand years.

The first person in forever to challenge for a seat on the Circle.

The first person to have a mating bond break...and then find another

mate almost instantly.

Fantasy novels always describe finding your mate as this wondrous, glorious, amazing thing. But I figure the authors who write about those have obviously never been mated to anyone in their life. If they were, they'd know just how messy and terrifying and overwhelming the entire situation is.

They'd know that there is no magic wand that just makes a relationship work. Or easy. Or even what you want.

There's a piece of me that wants to run away, that wants to do exactly what Hudson accused me of and bury my head until this entire situation goes away or just doesn't matter anymore.

But Hudson is watching me, waiting for my response. And he and Jaxon are both immortal anyway—and I'm pretty damn close. Which means this situation isn't going anywhere until I deal with it.

So instead of running, instead of hiding away in a desperate attempt to protect myself, I look at Hudson and tell him the only truth I know.

"You're right. Honesty won't keep any of us from getting hurt," I say as I think back to my conversation with Jaxon earlier that week. Our talk was as open and honest and *devastating* as any conversation I've ever had in my life, and we both walked away hurting. "But it does guarantee that we're on the same page. And I think that's all any of us can hope for."

I see the words hit Hudson, see him absorb them like body blows. And that's when I know that I have to tell him the whole truth, no matter how vulnerable, how exposed, how *damaged* it makes me feel.

Which is why I take a deep breath, do a slow count to five, and then blurt out, "Jaxon and I broke up."

## 14

## Talk to the Stone



Hudson's eyes go wide, his face colorless. "You broke up?" he repeats, like he can't believe what he's hearing.

I study his face, trying to figure out what he's thinking or feeling, but astonishment is the only emotion I can get from him before everything goes blank.

Which isn't exactly a surprise. I always thought Jaxon was good at hiding his emotions—if you discount the earthquakes, of course—but Hudson belongs in the World Series of Poker.

Even knowing that, I can't help but get nervous as he stares at me with deliberately empty eyes. Which is probably why I start tripping over my tongue trying to explain myself. "We decided to take a break so we could... well, he brought it up, so I guess you could say he decided...but we talked and thought a break might—"

The more I babble, the more stonelike Hudson's face becomes until I force myself to stop vomiting words and take an actual breath. As I do, I count backward from ten, and when I can finally think in some kind of coherent fashion, I start again. "He said it wasn't right... Everyone was in pain...and things, well, things just weren't..." I trail off, not sure what else to say.

"What they used to be?" He fills in the blanks. "Yeah, a rogue mating bond will do that to a couple."

"It isn't just the mating bond. We—"

"It's the mating bond," Hudson says, cutting me off. "Trying to pretend otherwise just makes us all look like children. You broke up because of me, which is what I've been trying to avoid."

"Is that why you've made sure you're never with me alone, at lunch or anywhere?"

He shrugs. "Yet here we are."

"Jaxon and I broke up because everything feels off between us lately," I contradict him. "Without the mating bond, nothing feels right. That's not because of you. That's because of Cole and the godawful spell from the Bloodletter." I squeeze his hand. "Honestly."

Hudson stares at me for a while but doesn't say anything. Instead, he drops my hand and just kind of shakes his head before he starts gathering up his pens and notebook off the table.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "Are you seriously just going to walk away without saying anything? Again?"

"The library's closing," he tells me, even as he nods to someone over my shoulder. "Go pack up your stuff, and I'll walk you to your room."

"You don't need to do that." I back away from him, confusion and hurt churning in my belly. I thought being honest was the way to go—we just agreed it was the right thing to do—and now he's treating me like gargoyle-itis is something he can catch if we have an actual conversation.

"I know I don't *need* to, but I'm going to." He steps out from behind the table for the first time since we started talking and begins shepherding me across the room toward my belongings.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking to my room on my own," I try, more forcefully this time.

"Grace." He sounds weary as he says my name, like everything about me, about this, is too much effort for him. It gets my back up, even before he continues. "Can we skip this fight if I acknowledge that I am aware that you are fully capable of doing anything you put your mind to? And I'm still going to walk you to your room."

"Why should I let you do that when it's obvious you don't want anything to do with me?"

His sigh is somehow both exaggerated and impatient. "What I want, at this exact moment, is to finish our conversation in private while I walk you to your room." His accent turns the words into sharp little arrows that hit with precision. "Is that obvious enough for you, or do I need to be more specific?"

I stop packing up my backpack to glare at him. He glares right back, mutters something under his breath that I can't quite catch but which I totally know was all about how tiring it is to put up with me. And I get it. I know my emotions have been all over the place tonight, but I'm trying to get that

under control. And even though they are a mess, that doesn't mean he gets to talk to me like I'm a child. Unless he wants me to actually act like a child.

It's a tempting thought. Wrong, probably, but still so tempting that I can't resist.

I lean back on my heels, cross my arms over my chest, and turn to stone.

The cool thing about learning to control my gargoyle is that now I can turn to my statue form and still be sentient—which means I get to watch as Hudson's eyes go big and his mouth literally drops open. And can I just say, turning Hudson speechless is worth every second of not being able to slap back at him while I'm encased in stone.

Especially when he remembers to close his mouth with a snap but makes sure to leave his fangs on full display this time. Although I'm not sure what he plans on doing with them, considering he'll need some serious dental work if he tries to take a bite out of me now.

Amka, the librarian, approaches warily, as if she's not sure she wants to get involved in whatever this is. Not that I blame her. Of course, this isn't the first altercation between students with power that I've seen, and I've only been here a few months. I can't imagine what she's seen in her time here.

Hudson says something to her, but I have no idea what, as it sounds like it's coming through at least fifteen feet of water—maybe more. She answers him, and whatever she says must not be what he wants to hear, because the anger on his face slowly morphs into something that looks an awful lot like fear.

It's not a common emotion for him—the last time I remember seeing it was when his father bit me—so I can't be entirely sure, but as he steps forward and starts talking urgently to me, I figure it might be time to change back. I wanted to teach him a lesson about being condescending, not actually worry him.

I close my eyes and reach deep inside myself for the platinum string that lets me shift between gargoyle and human so fast that my fingers brush past another string. It's the emerald-green string I noticed first in the laundry room, the one something inside me said not to touch. But I don't have time to consider that accident because another string has all my attention. It's a brilliant blue that's glowing brightly. More, it's shooting off sparks in all directions.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out it's our mating bond. I've known it

practically from the moment Hudson announced I was his mate—the first thing I did when I got over the shock was look for the string. It didn't take long to find it, as it was the only string that was glowing so brilliantly at that moment.

That was the last time it glowed. I've been checking it out every day, so I'm certain of it. But now it's glowing so brightly that it's practically iridescent, and the only thing I can think of is—

I gasp, my entire body going on red alert because in the blink of an eye, I can feel Hudson deep inside me.

It's not like before, when we could talk so clearly to each other. I don't know what he's saying now any more than I did a second ago, when he was all but shouting at me through the stone. But I can *feel* him, warm and strong and frantic. All the detachment he was projecting earlier is long gone.

It's that knowledge that has me grabbing on to the platinum string and shifting back as quickly as I can. Teaching him a lesson for being a jerk is one thing. Actually scaring him is something else entirely.

The moment I turn human again, Hudson grabs and pulls me against him in a hug that feels both incredibly relieved and incredibly intimate.

"What happened?" he asks as he moves away, his hands skimming up and down my arms like he can't quite believe I'm flesh and blood again—or like he's checking for injuries. "Why'd you shift?"

"Because you were being a jerk, and I was tired of listening to it, so I shifted to make sure I didn't have to listen anymore."

His mouth drops open for the second time in as many minutes, and behind us, Amka just shakes her head, chuckling. Hudson is too busy glaring at me to spare her so much as a glance, so she winks and gives me a thumbs-up sign. Apparently, I'm not the only one who thinks guys need to be put in their place when they act like overbearing jerks.

I have one moment to think to myself that I would never pull something like that on Jaxon, before Hudson is snarling, "Turning yourself to stone is the most immature use of powers I have ever heard of." Once again, his fangs are on full display, and I can't decide if he's trying to scare me or if it's just because he's that mad, he can't control them.

In the end, I decide it doesn't matter, that two can play this game. So I finish packing up my stuff, and then I lean forward until our faces are only about an inch apart. Then I tell him, "No, the most immature use of my

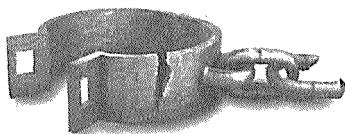


powers would have been if I'd turned *you* to stone."

Then I pat him on the shoulder—half threat, half reassurance—and sweep right past him. I wave at Amka on my way out the door and leave Hudson to either stew in his own anger or swallow his pride and scramble after me.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't want him to pick the second choice.

## A Little Thread-to-Thread Competition



I'm halfway to the staircase, just about convinced he's let his anger get the best of him, when Hudson catches me. And when I say he catches me, I mean exactly that.

I'm watching for him, listening for him, and still he moves so quickly and quietly that it's a shock when he wraps his hand around my wrist from behind and whirls me around. His hold is gentle despite the fact that the whole yank and spin happens so fast that I barely understand what's going on until I find myself face-to-face with a half-annoyed, half-amused vampire.

Hudson, however, knows exactly what's happening as he invades my space, backing me up until I can't go any farther, until my back is literally against the ancient tapestry-lined wall.

I think about pulling my wrist free, but he must sense it because his hold gets a little tighter—not tight enough to hurt but definitely tight enough that I feel the cold press of his fingers against the sensitive skin of my inner wrist.

"You don't think you're the only one who can use your powers irresponsibly, do you?" he asks, and there's just enough arrogance in the question to set my teeth on edge...and, conversely, to make my breath catch in my throat.

Which makes me feel like such a cliché. Come on.

Boy acts like jerk. Girl gets one up on boy. Boy beats his chest and girl falls under his spell?

Umm, no thank you. It's going to take more than some random chest beating to get me to fall into line—no matter how attractive and creative the guy doing the chest beating is.

Which is why I say, "I thought you told me that you didn't need to use your powers," in the most bored voice I can muster. "You *are* a vampire, after all."

"That was an observation, not a statement of intent," he answers, and now he's so close that I can feel his breath hot against my ear.

Shivers that have nothing to do with fear work their way down my spine, and I squirm a little, trying to put some more space between his mouth and my skin—not because I don’t like the feel of him but because I’m afraid that I might like it too much.

“Bummer,” I tell him when I’ve finally achieved a satisfactory distance from his face. “I was looking forward to you blowing stuff up again.”

He turns serious, the mischievous glint fading from his eyes. “And here I’ve been working really hard to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

His voice is as sardonic as ever, but I know Hudson well enough by now to recognize the sincerity running just below the sarcasm.

It sneaks past the defenses I’ve had in place all night, and I answer, “Yeah, so have I,” before I even realize I’m going to say it.

His shoulders slump, and for a second, he looks more defeated than I have ever seen him. “This is a huge mess, Grace.”

“The hugest,” I agree, right before he lowers his forehead to mine.

It feels like an intimate position—an intimate moment—and I think about pulling away. But intimate doesn’t necessarily mean sexual. We’ve had plenty of intimate moments—he lived in my head for weeks. And so I tell myself this is just one more.

Besides, I think I need his comfort at least as much as he needs mine.

And so I do the only thing I can do in this situation, the only thing that feels right. I pull my wrist from his now loose hold and wrap my arms around him. The universe might have played one hell of a practical joke on us when it made us mates, but right now we’re just two friends sharing a quiet moment in a fucked-up situation.

Or at least that’s what I tell myself.

The embrace only lasts a minute, but it’s enough for me to memorize the feel of his long, lithe body against my own.

Long enough for me to feel the super-fast beat of his heart beneath my hands.

More than long enough for me to...

“I felt you,” I tell him when he finally takes a step back. “When I was stone. I felt you along the mating bond. You were trying to get to me.”

And just that easily, annoyance and something else—something I don’t quite recognize—flash back into his eyes. “I thought something had happened to you, that you’d managed to get yourself stuck as a statue again. Or maybe

someone had done a kind of spell on you. It freaked me out.” The look he gives me warns me not to do something like that again.

“Yeah, well, I really didn’t like the way you were talking to me. I’m not a child, and I don’t appreciate you treating me like one.”

I think I can actually hear Hudson’s teeth grind together, but in the end, all he does is incline his head and say, “You’re right. I apologize.”

His admission astonishes me, so much so that I say, “I’m sorry, I thought I was talking to Hudson Vega.”

“Never mind,” he mutters as he pulls away and starts walking again.

I fall into step behind him, appreciating the way he always keeps his stride short for me so that I don’t have to scramble to keep up.

“So you used the mating bond to try to get to me?” I ask as we round a corner.

He looks uncomfortable with the subject, and maybe I should lay off, but how am I supposed to know how the mating bond works if I don’t ask questions? These are the kinds of details they don’t cover in my magic class, the kinds of things I don’t think to ask until I experience them.

“I used it to send you energy, the same way you did to me after the Circle challenge.” He shoots me a look. “You remember. When it nearly killed you.”

“I’m pretty sure that was your father’s bite,” I shoot back. “And what was I supposed to do, die with your powers still inside me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Trust me not to let you die at all?” He sounds so exasperated that I nearly laugh. Only the knowledge that it will aggravate him even more keeps me from cracking up.

“I did trust you,” I tell him as we finally reach the stairs. “I mean, I *do* trust you.”

The look he gives me is searing, even before he reaches between us and takes my hand. He squeezes it softly before letting it go again.

“So you saw our mating bond?” he asks as we make it to the top of the stairs.

“I see it every day,” I answer. “But it looked different today. Like it was all lit up and sparking with energy.” I look at the strings again, and the sparks coming off it are gone, but it is still glowing.

“I’m pretty sure the sparks were me, trying to get to you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured, too.”

“Did you notice anything else?” he asks as he steers me into the long

hallway that leads to my room.

“Like what?”

He clears his throat a couple of times and keeps his eyes facing straight ahead as he says, “Like how different it looked from the bond you had with Jaxon?”

“Seriously, Hudson? You’re comparing *bonds* now?” My tone suggests he’s comparing something else.

“Not like that!” It’s his turn to roll his eyes at me. “But I’ve been reading up on mating bonds, and every single thing I find about them comes to the same conclusion.”

“And what’s that?” I ask warily.

“That they can’t be broken. Not with magic, not with will. The only thing that breaks them is death, and—”

“Sometimes not even then,” I finish for him. “I know, I know. I got the same speech from Macy.”

“Yeah, but Cole broke your bond with Jaxon—”

“I am aware of that,” I tell him with just a hint of my own sarcasm. “I was there, in case you don’t remember.”

“I know, Grace.” He sighs. “And I’m not trying to hurt you by talking about it. But every book ever written on the subject can’t be wrong. Which got me thinking—”

“How did the Bloodletter even have a spell to break it?” I ask.

He looks surprised, whether that I’ve questioned this, too, or that I keep interrupting him, I don’t know.

What I do know is that it bothers me hearing Hudson talk about mating bonds—and especially about breaking them. I don’t know why, but it does, so I plow ahead, determined to finish the thought for him. “If they can’t be broken, how did some old vampire in a cave just happen to have the spell lying around to do the one thing no one else in history has been able to do?”

“Exactly. Plus...” He pauses a moment, like he’s got to prepare himself for whatever he’s going to say next—or my reaction to it.

It’s that thought that has me rolling my shoulders back and bracing for whatever blow is coming, even though I know it won’t be physical.

“Do you remember what your bond with Jaxon looked like?” he asks. “I only saw it once, in the laundry room, and I didn’t think anything of it at the time. I didn’t realize then...”

“What?” I ask as my stomach twists itself into knots.

He sighs. “What a mating bond should look like.”

“So what are you saying?” I ask in a voice so shrill, I can’t believe it’s coming out of my body.

“I’m not saying you weren’t truly mated.” Hudson places a soothing hand on my shoulder. “I’m saying something was wrong with your bond with Jaxon. I’m not sure if that was because the spell was already at work or if...”

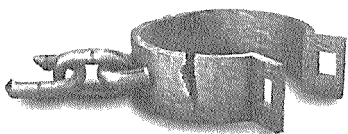
“Or if there was always something wrong with it?” I finish.

“Yes,” he answers reluctantly. “It was two colors, Grace. Green...and *black*.”

Turns out I was right to brace for that body blow, because—just like that—my stomach bottoms out and I feel dizzy, one thought circling in my head over and over.

If something was always wrong with my bond with Jaxon...it might never be fixable.

## 16



## You Can Run but You Can't Hide

“I need to go,” I mumble and take off down the hall, hoping Hudson will just let me go. The last thing I want to do today is more soul-searching detective work.

Up until this moment, I think I still believed this situation could be fixed. That Jaxon and I could be together again. All week, I’d been finally grieving the loss of the mating bond, but breakup or no, I still thought we’d find a way to work things out. Silly me.

I should have known the magical universe would have one more fuck-you up its sleeve.

I just hope Hudson lets me make it back to my room to mourn in privacy the loss of *everything* Jaxon and I had.

Hudson obviously doesn’t get the memo, though, because he starts walking with me. Of course. Because why would he actually do what I want him to do, even this once?

My hands are shaking as I’m fighting the tears threatening to lay me bare, and I wait for him to ask me what’s wrong or, worse, if I’m okay. But he doesn’t. Instead, he just walks silently beside me until, finally, he says, “I understand that news was a bit of a shock, Grace. But really, are you that surprised Jaxy-Waxy couldn’t even get a mating bond right?”

I stop walking and slowly turn to face him, fury quickly replacing the despair that had been swallowing me whole. “Are you serious right now? Do you even have an *ounce* of compassion in your *entire* body?”

He looks bored again. “I’m a vampire. Compassion isn’t something we actually do.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Keep it up, and I’m going to turn you into a pile of rocks.”

“Ooooh, I’m *so* scared.” He waves his hands in mock panic. “Oh, wait.

Been there, done that, didn't want the T-shirt."

I don't know if it's the ridiculous hand gestures or the idea of Hudson in a *Vampires Rock* T-shirt, but my anger disappears as fast as it came on. This whole discussion is just so absurd.

Hudson must not think so, though, as he looks totally offended—at least until I look deep in his eyes and see the satisfaction there. And I realize another truth tonight.

Hudson picked a fight on purpose. He knew I was devastated, knew I was using every ounce of control I had not to burst into tears right in the middle of the hallway. All the badgering and sarcasm wasn't because he was being a dick. It was because he was being *nice*, though I'm sure he'd rather die than admit it.

It's not the first time he's done it, and it probably won't be the last. But maybe, one of these days, I'll stop falling for it. Maybe.

Then again, maybe not.

Because something about it, something about the snide comments (on both sides) and the bickering back and forth, sometimes it feels an awful lot like...foreplay.

Just the thought has my already queasy stomach flipping and knotting up at the same time. Because foreplay is a lot of things—fun, exciting, sexy—but it usually leads to something else, something important, and I don't have a clue how I feel about that. Not when it's barely been a week since Jaxon broke my heart all over again...and just a handful of minutes since I learned it can never be fixed again.

We finally make it to my room, but before I can dart inside and throw a *thanks for a weird evening* over my shoulder, Hudson reaches a hand out to stop me. "You okay?" he asks, brows raised and forearm resting against the doorframe.

"Yeah," I tell him, even though I'm not sure it's true, what with these strange kinds of things happening inside me, things I never imagined I'd feel in response to Hudson of all people. He may be my mate, but he's also my friend and this moment, this pose, feels distinctly un-friend-like.

"I should go in," I tell him, hating how breathless I sound. Hating even more the way his pupils dilate in response...except, also not.

"Okay." He steps back. "But let me know when you really want to get some answers."



“Answers to what?”

“To those questions we keep throwing around. You can’t hide forever, Grace.”

It’s so close to what I’d been thinking earlier, what I’d sort of told Macy, that it gets my back up. “I’m not weak,” I tell him. “I am capable of dealing with hard things, you know.”

“You’re capable of dealing with anything. No one doubts that—and if they do, they’re daft, because you’ve proven it over and over again. You’re the most incredible person I’ve ever met.”

Hudson doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean, which is probably why his words touch me so much. But before I can think of how to respond, he continues. “But you have a tendency to avoid conflict whenever you can.”

“There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to fight,” I tell him.

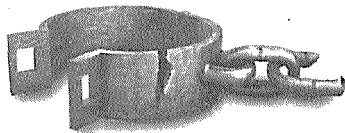
“No, there isn’t. But there is something wrong with hiding from things until they get so big that you can’t ignore them anymore. It’s like people who shove bills in a drawer because they don’t want to face them. They keep stuffing the drawer until no more bills fit—and by that time, their life has gone completely to hell. Yes, things might be bad, and it doesn’t seem like there is an easy solution at first, but after a while, if you wait too long, there are only hard choices left to make.”

His words hit home. And I can’t help but feel he’s talking about our mating bond. He never said what exactly he’d been researching in the library, but suddenly I have a clue. I haven’t really let myself examine too closely how Hudson might be feeling being mated to me. I wasn’t ready to face any answer he might give—that he wanted the bond *or* he regretted it. But while I was hiding my head in the sand, Hudson wasn’t.

“You said you were researching mating bonds tonight,” I say, my breath barely a whisper above the pounding of my heart. “Exactly what were you trying to discover?”

His gaze holds mine for several beats before he tells me, “How to break them.”

## Mixed Messages



Three hours later, I'm still staring at the ceiling over my bed as I consider what Hudson said about how I avoid conflict.

I want him to be wrong, I really do. But the longer I lay here on this hot-pink comforter that I don't want—that I've never wanted—I can't help wondering if he's right. Especially when I roll over and bury my face in a hot-pink throw pillow.

I take a deep breath.

And for the first time, I allow questions I've ignored for months to invade my head like a swarm of angry bees.

How did Lia know that I was Jaxon's mate before I'd ever heard of Katmere? Before Jaxon and I ever touched—since you supposedly only mate after you touch? For that matter, how did she even know where to find me?

How was I able to take Hudson and trap us on a different plane—for months? And why did my mating bond with Jaxon disappear while we were there?

Why was my mating bond with Jaxon two colors instead of just one, a twisted braid of green and black instead of one brilliant, solid color?

How did the Bloodletter know how to break it? How did she even know it *could* be broken if a mating bond has never been broken before?

How did I end up mated to Hudson? It's one thing to have a mating bond break—which is supposed to be impossible. It's another thing to have a new mating bond snap into place with a new person on the same afternoon—umm, impossible times a million, anyone?

As the familiar panic bubbles in my chest, I can't help but be angry with Hudson for basically daring me to do this. It wasn't fair. He has no idea what it's like to live with panic attacks.

It's not that I've never thought about these questions before. Of course

I have—and a zillion other ones, too. And then I lock them away in a box as quickly as they come. But can anyone blame me? I'd do almost anything to avoid a panic attack. To lose control of myself so much that I can't even regulate my own ability to breathe—it's terrifying. And yes, maybe my coping mechanism is a bad one. That doesn't mean anyone has the right to judge me on it, especially not Hudson, for whom sarcasm is an actual emotion... or twelve.

Besides, what am I supposed to do with the answers once I have them? Will they really change anything? Or will knowing just make things more difficult, one more painful thing to face? If I've learned anything in the last six months, it's that every time I think things are okay—every time I think I've solved a problem—a bigger one shows up to kick my butt.

Seriously. What does Hudson really know about my life? I start to work up a heady level of righteous indignation, and it's all aimed at Hudson's too-strong-for-his-own-good jaw.

It's barely been six months since my parents died—*six months*. Plus, I spent over half that time locked in stone with Hudson. And still, the number of things that have come at me would have been impossible to imagine if I hadn't actually lived through them all.

Not to be dramatic, but is it any wonder I'm having panic attacks on a semi-daily basis now?

Since my parents died, I've moved thousands of miles away from the only home I've ever known. I've met my mate, found out I was a gargoyle, gained a bunch of enemies, fought for my place on a council I didn't even know existed a few months ago, found the only other living one of my kind chained up in a cave where I also lost one of my friends, lost my mate, got bitten by one of my new enemies and almost died, *and* found my new mate—all while trying to graduate from high school.

Hudson can say I'm hiding from my problems all he wants, but from where I'm sitting? It looks like problems are doing a really good job of finding me whether I'm hiding from them or not.

But then I think about what Hudson said about the drawer getting filled up with bills until no more will even fit inside. And I think about Xavier dying, about Jaxon breaking up with me, about Cole hopefully rotting somewhere cold. About Hudson being mated to someone he wants to *not* be mated to so badly that he's spending his evenings researching ways to break our bond.

That last one makes me pause. And swallow my indignation in one bitter pill.

My fear has left Hudson to try and solve our problems all alone. I maybe can't deal with every question, but I can at least try to answer one.

But which one should I start with?

And then I think about the Bloodletter. I think about the Bloodletter a lot, along with the spell she somehow knew to give Jaxon to break our mating bond.

If someone went so far as to harm my bond with Jaxon...what else would they do to me? To Jaxon? To Hudson? And suddenly, it isn't the panic attack these questions bring that seizes me. It's the anger. If she knew how to tear Jaxon and me apart...then she owes us a spell to fix it, too. And some answers.

"You keep tossing and turning over there." Macy's voice is soft and sleepy. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"No worries. I don't sleep much anymore anyway." There's a rustling of sheets, and then the small multicolored light by Macy's bed clicks on. "What's going on? I notice Jaxon hasn't been around much lately... Nor has Hudson, come to think of it. You guys fighting?"

I take a deep breath and rip off the Band-Aid. "Jaxon broke up with me last week."

Macy doesn't say anything, just lays there in the semi-darkness, her steady breath going in and out for several minutes. She doesn't ask me why I didn't tell her, and I love her even more for that. Then she rolls over, holds my gaze, and just says, "I'm sorry."

I shake my head, fighting back tears. I cannot talk about this tonight. I'm too exhausted to have a heart-to-heart with my cousin. And she must sense this because she asks simply, "Anything you want to do about it?"

Yes, I do, and an idea begins to form in my head. "Do you think I could get an appointment with the Bloodletter?"

"The Bloodletter?" Macy sounds surprised but must clue in on what I'm thinking pretty quickly because she adds, "I don't know about an 'appointment,' but I'm pretty sure you could convince Jaxon to take you."

"What if he won't? I don't have a clue how to get there on my own."

"He'll take you." She sounds a lot more confident than I feel after the conversation Hudson and I had this evening. "Your mating bond is as

important to him as it is to you.”

“Last week, I would have agreed, but now...” I think about the coldness in his eyes when he told me we needed a break. “Now I’m not so sure.”

“Well, I’m sure enough for the both of us,” Macy says. “Text him and ask him to take you this weekend. If nothing else, she owes you both an explanation.”

I tend to think she owes us more than that, since her spell destroyed my life. Then again, that could just be me...

I roll over and grab my phone. But instead of texting Jaxon, I text Hudson.

**Me:** Hey, want to go somewhere with me this weekend?

There’s no response, and I realize it’s late; he’s probably already gone to bed. But then three dots appear, meaning he’s texting a response, and I can’t help that my heart picks up a beat.

**Hudson:** Define somewhere

I smile. Of course that’s what Hudson would reply.

**Me:** Does it matter?

**Hudson:** If you’re planning a coup d’état of a small country, yes. If you want to make snow angels, no.

**Me:** Sorry. No coup

**Me:** I want to go see the Bloodletter

No response. I force myself to stare at my phone until three dots appear again.

**Hudson:** I’m free now...

Of course he is. I mean, it’s not insulting *at all* that he’s so eager to break our bond that he’s willing to drop everything to do it.

**Me:** Saturday

**Hudson:** Or now

I send him the eye roll emoji.

**Me:** I won’t change my mind.

**Me:** And I’m inviting Jaxon, too

**Hudson:** Maybe I was too hasty about the snow angel thing...

I burst out laughing, because how can I not?

**Me:** I’ll see you in class

**Hudson:** “Pain and suffering are always inevitable”

**Me:** I thought Crime and Punishment was too light for you

**Hudson:** Apparently I’m feeling optimistic

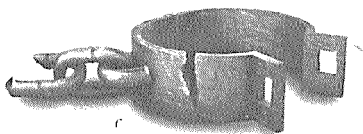
**Me:** Good night

**Hudson:** Good night, Grace

I hold my phone for a few more seconds, waiting to see if Hudson will text something else. When he doesn't, I think about texting Jaxon a heads-up about Saturday, then decide I can just talk to him in class tomorrow. Texting a boy the week after he breaks up with you reeks of desperation, especially when it's after midnight.

"From the size of the grin you're wearing, I'm guessing he said yes," Macy says.

She thinks I was texting Jaxon. I know I should correct her, but the truth is, I don't have it in me tonight to explain Hudson is just as eager to break up with me as Jaxon was.



## In a Class of Their Own

Macy and I wake up ten minutes before the bell rings.

Which is no big deal for Macy, who does a little glamour and is ready to go. I, on the other hand, am pretty much completely screwed. Normally I love being a gargoyle, but I have to admit, this no-magic-works-on-me thing is a total drag sometimes...especially when it means splashing ice-cold water on my face because I don't have time to wait for it to warm up past forty degrees.

"Come on, Grace, let's go!" Macy calls from her spot next to the door, and I fight the urge to flip her off. It's not her fault she can't do a glamour on me, after all—she's tried numerous times. Any more than it's her fault that she looks perfectly put together while I look like a monster-movie reject after the fight scene.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I tell her as I sling my backpack over my shoulder and grab a purple rabbit-ear scrunchie from my desk drawer. I fasten my hair into a ponytail as we walk out the door and am glad we left before I could look in the mirror. Especially since I'm pretty sure the purple polo I grabbed off my closet floor in a panic is the one I threw there last week after realizing a stain didn't come out in the laundry.

Fantastic.

Because the only thing worse than walking into a room full of monsters looking like you just rolled out of bed is walking into a room full of them looking like you never even *made* it to bed.

They sense weakness.

Macy and I race down the stairs together, then split off once we get to the first floor. She has drama in one of the outside cottages while I have Ethics of Power. It's a senior seminar taught for one six-week period, and it's required to graduate—I assume because Uncle Finn isn't okay with sending

a bunch of powerful paranormals into the world without some grounding in right and wrong.

It's an interesting subject, and also the only one I'm taking that I'm currently doing well in, since I haven't missed any classes, but I dread it anyway. The teacher is brilliant, but she's also a real jerk. Plus, her classroom is, by far, the scariest room at Katmere—and that's saying something, considering the tunnels down below the castle are filled with human bones.

I've asked about a million times what this room was originally used for, but no one ever answers me. I think it's because they're trying to spare my delicate sensibilities, but all the not-knowing does is spur my imagination on...and not in a good way. How many reasons could there possibly be for soot stains and claw marks etched into stone? Especially when there are remnants of what look to be iron shackles at various heights and locations in the room...

A quick glance at my phone tells me I've got about a minute before the tardy chimes go off—and by chimes, I mean the chorus of Uncle Finn's new favorite song, Billie Eilish's "Bury a Friend." Because he really is all about the atmosphere. It drives Macy up the wall, but after spending the last twelve years of my life following a boring bell schedule, this makes a nice change.

The ethics classroom is separated from the rest of the castle by a long, winding, windowless hallway, and I move through it at a run—partly because I'm late and partly because I really hate being in this passageway alone.

There's nothing overtly scary about it, except every time I walk through here, I get a chill down my spine that has nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with something being off in this part of the school. Really, really off.

Of course, the hallway leads to what I'm pretty sure is a centuries-old torture chamber, so is it any surprise it feels creepy?

Eventually the passageway ends, and even though I know I'll be late, I pause for just a second to get my wits about me *and* to smooth my hair. After all, its location isn't the only thing that makes this the scariest room at Katmere. It's what's inside that also stresses me out.

Which is why, even though the tardy chimes sound, I still take a couple of moments for a few deep breaths before opening the door and ducking inside the large, circular classroom. I keep my head down and aim for one of the empty desks in the back, but I've barely taken two steps before my teacher's



voice booms across the classroom.

"Welcome, Miss Foster. So nice of you to join us for class today."

"I'm sorry I'm late, Ms. Virago." I start to tell her it won't happen again, but I've been at Katmere Academy long enough to know not to make promises like that. Especially to the most shrewish teacher in the school.

"As am I." She speaks slowly, biting off each word like it's the enemy. "See me after class for an assignment to make up what you missed."

What I missed? I glance around the room, trying to figure out what I could possibly have missed in ten seconds, but it doesn't even look like they've started taking notes yet. Ms. Virago must see me looking, though, because her eyes narrow right before she spins around and marches back up to the front of the classroom, her heels clapping out an angry staccato rhythm with each step that she takes.

"Is there a problem, Miss Foster?"

"No, not at all—"

"Then perhaps you should explain to us how Rawls's first principle can be applied—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, ma'am." Hudson's voice rings through the classroom, his tone placating and...*angelic*? "But could you please go over what Kant's stand would be on magical torture one more time? I'm still a little confused by his categorical imperative—"

She sighs heavily. "CI is *not* that hard to understand, Mr. Vega. At least not if you pay attention."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm just really struggling with Kant's entire philosophy, to be honest." There's not an ounce of sarcasm in his voice, and I swear he sounds sweeter than I have *ever* heard him.

"Well, then maybe you should see me after class, too. You and Miss Foster can spend your weekend working on an extra-credit project together."

"I would—"

A loud cracking sound fills the air, and half of Jaxon's pen goes flying across the room. It bounces off Ms. Virago's podium before rolling across the floor to land at her feet.

She turns her stink eye on Jaxon and Flint who, God bless him, cracks up. Just full-on starts laughing like a hyena in the middle of class.

And that, in a nutshell, is why I hate this damn class despite the interesting subject. Not only do we have the teacher from hell, but somehow I'm part of

the most screwed-up testosterone-filled quadrangle—rectangle—square?—in history.

And that's before Ms. Virago announces we're going to spend the class working on different ethical problems as part of a group project—right before she gives a viperish smile and says, “Oh, and Miss Foster, Mr. Vega, the other Mr. Vega, and Mr. Montgomery, the four of you will be doing today's very first presentation.”

# 19

## Misery Hates Company



“Really?” Jaxon is the first one to speak after we push our desks together. “You just couldn’t keep your mouth shut, could you?”

“This coming from the child who threw his pen at the teacher?” Hudson snipes back.

“I didn’t throw it. I—” He breaks off as he realizes his defense of what happened is going nowhere good.

“How are you, Grace?” Flint smiles.

“I’m fine.” As long as you don’t count having to spend the next ninety minutes in my own personal version of hell. “Why?”

“No reason.” He shrugs. “Just thought you were...”

“Looking a little rough?” I fill in for him. “It was a long night.”

Jaxon glares at him. “She looks fine.”

“I never said she didn’t,” Flint responds.

“You okay?” Hudson asks softly. “Did something happen after I left?”

“You spent the night with him?” Jaxon’s voice is emotionless, but the eyes he turns on me are anything but.

“Evening,” I tell him. “We spent the evening in—”

“Wow.” He swings his gaze back to Hudson. “Preying on upset girls is super classy.”

“Wait a minute!” I interject. “Nobody was preying on anyone—”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have upset her,” Hudson interrupts me. “Then *you* could have spent the night with her.”

“Evening!” I clarify again as Jaxon’s fist clenches on his thigh.

“So how do you think Kant would feel about this whole thing you’ve got going on?” Flint interjects with a wave of his hand, his eyes bouncing back and forth between Hudson and Jaxon like he’s watching a tennis match.

“Are you high right now or something?” I demand.

"Hey, someone's got to do the actual classwork," he shoots back. "I'm just trying to do my part."

"By exacerbating the situation?" I glare at him.

"By refocusing us on ethics philosophers," he answers with a look so deliberately pious, I'm surprised he hasn't pulled out a halo to plop right on top of his afro.

"You couldn't wait to go to him?" Jaxon asks.

"If by 'go to him,' you mean running into him in the library, then yes," I tell him, not even trying to hide how insulted I feel.

"You know," Hudson adds, "the big room with the books. Oh wait, do you even know what a book is?"

"I need a new group," I say to no one in particular.

"I'll be in your group," Flint volunteers.

"You're already in my group," I tell him through gritted teeth. "That's kind of the point of a new group."

"Hey!" He pulls a mock-wounded face. "I'm the only one in this group who's done any work."

"Oh, really?" I ask. "And what work have you done exactly?"

He scoots his notebook over to me. He's drawn a line down the center of the page and written *Kant* at the top of one side and *Hudson* at the top of the other. Underneath *Kant* is a sketch of Jaxon...with devil horns and a pointy tail.

Hudson leans over to check out Flint's work and grins. "It's a surprisingly good likeness," he tells Flint, who holds his hand out for a fist bump.

"What do you think Kant and Kierkegaard would say about bringing your personal issues into the classroom?" Ms. Virago's voice slices through the already thick tension surrounding our group.

Because what this conversation really needs is her butting her nose in and making everything worse. I don't want to make excuses to this woman, but since I can't trust any of my partners not to screw things up, I know I need to try.

But before I can come up with anything to say, Hudson replies, "I'm pretty sure Kierkegaard would think it was subjective." Which...come on.

Jaxon rolls his eyes, Flint ducks his head to hide his grin, and I can't help it—I let out a snort of laughter, then slap my hand over my mouth and nose in a desperate effort to hide the evidence.

But it's too late. Ms. Virago is fuming, and she doesn't care who knows it. "That's it!" she hisses at Hudson and me. "Both of you, up to my desk!"

Shit. There goes the one good grade I've currently got.

*I'm sorry*, Hudson mouths to me as I grab a pen and notebook.

I shrug back at him. It's not his fault I was ridiculous enough to laugh.

Hudson starts to follow the teacher, but Jaxon grabs my hand and asks softly, "You want me to get you out of it?"

His skin feels good against mine, so good, in fact, that it takes me a few seconds to register what he's saying. But once I do register it, I shake my head.

I mean, sure, I'd *like* him to get me out of it. I do not have time for whatever extra work Ms. Virago is about to heap on Hudson and me. But at the same time, I hate how scared people are of Jaxon again, how much they distance themselves from him. How much worse would that get if I just let him use his influence to get me out of trouble?

I smile my thanks at him for offering, but whatever brief glimpse of humanity he gave me is gone as he stares at me with those dark eyes that seem to get colder with every second that passes.

I drop my gaze, more hurt than I want to admit by the indifference written all over him. I know we're not together, but does that mean he can just turn off his feelings for me? Does it mean that he really doesn't care about me anymore?

But how can he just do that? I'm mated to someone else, for God's sake, and I still care about *him*. Yes, things feel different between us. Yes, I have confusing emotions zinging around inside me for Hudson. But that's the bond, not me.

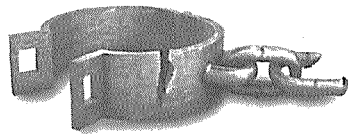
I, Grace Foster, the girl inside the gargoyle, still love Jaxon. I can feel it when I look at him, feel it when he touches me. So how can it be possible that he doesn't feel the same way?

It isn't possible, I decide as Ms. Virago speaks firmly to Hudson and me and assigns us that extra project she promised at the beginning of class. Jaxon may be hiding his feelings behind that awful wall of coldness, but that doesn't mean the feelings aren't there.

And once we meet with the Bloodletter, once we figure out a way to break Hudson's and my mating bond, everything will go back to normal. It has to.

Because if it doesn't? I don't know what will happen...to any of us.

## The Joke's on You



The rest of the day passes in a blur of classes and work, more classes and more work, until I want to say *screw it all*. So when a text comes in from Flint asking to go for a flight with him, I'm tempted. Really, really tempted. It's been more than a week since I've flown, and I'm so ready to stretch my wings.

But running out on the pile of homework I have would be completely irresponsible—not to mention only put me further behind. It's one thing to be drowning because of circumstances. It's another thing entirely to make bad decisions that only drag you down. I have a little less than two months until graduation. I can do anything for that short amount of time—even ridiculous amounts of philosophy homework.

**Me:** Sorry, can't go. Drowning in ethics project

In response, Flint sends me a GIF of a little boy crying—which makes me send him a GIF of a little girl crying even harder.

**Flint:** Study hard, New Girl

**Me:** Try not to fly into a mountain, Dragon Boy

He responds with a paper airplane crashing and burning, because of course he does.

While there's a part of me that would like nothing more than to stay here trading GIFs with Flint all afternoon, that's not going to get this project done. I drop my phone in the front pocket of my backpack, then do a quick change out of my uniform and into black sweats and the *Notorious RBG* T-shirt my mom gave me for my seventeenth birthday.

I grab an apple and a can of Dr Pepper on my way out, then head to the study room on the second floor where I'm supposed to meet Hudson. But I'm barely halfway down the hall when Mekhi comes barreling out of his room and straight into me.

“Oh, shit!” Mekhi grabs on to my shoulders and keeps me from flying into the nearest wall—just one of the hazards of getting in the way of a vampire on a mission. “Sorry, Grace. I didn’t see you there.”

“Here I thought you were trying to break a rib or two,” I joke.

“And get myself on the Vega brothers’ shit list?” He gives an exaggerated shudder even though his warm brown eyes are laughing as he teases, “My neck just got better, thank you very much.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, because you’ve got so much to worry about from Jaxon and Hudson.”

“If I hurt you, I do,” he says, and though he’s still smiling, his tone is about a hundred times more solemn now. “And so do you. You need to be careful, Grace.”

“I’m *trying* to be careful. But in case you haven’t noticed, it’s really hard to figure out what either of them is thinking at any given moment.”

“Jaxon loves you,” Mekhi tells me.

“Does he?” I shake my head. “Because these last few days, I haven’t been so sure.”

“He’s hurt.”

“Yeah, well, so am I. But every time I try to talk to him, it just makes things worse. He’s treating me like I’m...” I drift off on a sigh, not sure what I want to say. Or more honestly, not sure I want to say it.

But clearly Mekhi has no such inhibitions. “Like you’re already gone?”

My shoulders slump. “Yeah.”

He looks away and doesn’t say anything else for what feels like forever. But when his gaze finally meets mine again, it’s deadly serious. “You might want to think about why that is.”

I start to tell him that that’s pretty much my point—I *don’t know why*. But before I can, he wraps his arm around my shoulders in a hug and says, “Things will work out the way they’re supposed to. You just need to give it time.”

I start to call him on the biggest cop-out ever, but he shoots me a sympathetic look and takes off in the opposite direction from where I’m heading.

Freaking vampires. You never know exactly where you stand with them, do you?

I wouldn’t trade being a gargoyle for anything—except maybe having my parents back—but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about how much

simpler my life was before I knew vampires existed. Certainly before I met two of the most attractive, contrary, *difficult* vampires in the entire world. Probably even the universe.

Still, I can't help thinking about what Mekhi told me about being careful—with Jaxon *and* Hudson. And I get it. I do. Because there's a tiny corner of me that's terrified we'll destroy one another before this is all over.

Maybe that's why I pull out my phone and text Jaxon.

**Me:** How does a mummy start a letter?

I wait a minute for him to answer, but he doesn't, so I finish making my way to the study room. To Hudson.

He isn't there, which I probably should have anticipated, since I'm ten minutes early. But I don't know. I guess I grew so used to him being in my head all the time that I just expect him to be wherever I need him to be. Which is ridiculous and a habit I definitely need to break.

I set up at the only open table, snacking on my apple as I pull up a bunch of information on the ethics of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Ms. Virago assigned the philosophers—and apparently she's got a thing for the ancient Greeks—but we have to pick the ethical question we want to examine from all three philosophers' points of view before we decide which one we think is right.

I've got a couple of ideas, and I'm jotting them down when Hudson finally gets there. "Sorry," he says as he settles into the chair across from me. "I didn't expect you to be here yet."

"This is the time we agreed on, right?" I glance up with a smile, then refocus on my notes. I don't want to lose the idea that's brewing.

"True. It's just—" He breaks off.

"What?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Never mind."

I glance up again, but he's looking at me strangely, so strangely that I put my pen down and hold his gaze. "Hey, what's going on?" I ask. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, of course." But he seems taken aback by the question, though I can't figure out why.

"You sure?" I ask after he doesn't say anything else—which is distinctly un-Hudson-like in and of itself. God knows he's never been one who's short of things to say. But after the day I've had, I'm really not in the mood to try



and guess what's wrong with him, so I just raise my brows and ask again, "What's going on, Hudson?"

"Nothing." There's a bit more bite in his tone this time, and relief skitters through me. This Hudson I know what to do with. The other, softer one...I don't have a clue. "Why?"

"I don't know. You just seem...weird."

"Weird?" He lifts an imperious brow. "I am *never* weird."

And I giggle. That's the Hudson I know. "Never mind. Let's get to work."

"That is what we're here for." He pulls out his laptop and a notebook. "Any ideas on what question you want to discuss?"

I give him my ideas, and after a few minutes of debate, we settle on the butterfly effect—is it ethical to change something in time, for the right reasons, if you know that it will change other things later on, maybe in a not-so-okay way?

He takes Socrates, I take Aristotle, and we decide to meet in the middle with Plato.

I find an article about Aristotle's *On the Soul* and start taking notes on things we might be able to use. It's a pretty interesting article, and I get wrapped up in it, so much that I'm barely paying attention when Hudson clears his throat before saying out of the blue, "No one's ever asked me that before."

I'm in the middle of writing something down, so I don't look up as I ask, "Asked you what?"

"If I'm okay."

His answer doesn't register at first, but when it does, my brain shuts down. It just flat-out stops working for one second, two.

But then I'm jerking my eyes up, and Hudson is right there—his face open, his gaze oceanic—and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. Not just because of the way he's looking at me but because the full weight of his words finally sinks in. What they *mean*.

Awareness charges the air between us, has my heart beating way too fast and the hair on the back of my neck standing straight up. And still, I can't bring myself to tear my gaze away from his. Still, I can't do anything but lose myself in the bottomless depths of his eyes.

"No one?" I manage to force the words out of my too-tight throat.

He shakes his head, gives a little self-deprecating shrug, and just like that, he destroys me.

I've always known his life was awful. I've seen glimpses of it, figured things out by what he didn't say, even met the horrible people who call themselves his parents. But it's never registered before—at least not like this—that Hudson has never had anyone in his whole two-hundred-plus-year existence who cared about him. Who really, truly cared about him and not what he could do or what they could get from him.

It's an awful realization, and a heartbreaking one.

"Don't." His voice is hoarse.

"Don't what?" I ask, my throat somehow even tighter than it was just a minute ago.

"Don't feel sorry for me. That's not why I told you." It's obvious he's uncomfortable, but he doesn't look away. Neither do I.

I can't.

"This isn't pity," I finally whisper. "I could never pity you."

Something moves behind his eyes, something that looks an awful lot like grief. "Because I'm a monster?"

"Because you made it." I reach for his hand impulsively, and the second our skin touches, heat slams through me. "Because you're better than them. Because no matter what they did, they couldn't break you."

His hand tightens on mine, his fingers sliding between my own. And then we're holding hands.

It feels better than I expect it to, certainly better than it should, so I don't pull back. Neither does he. And for a minute, everything fades away.

The other students all around us.

The project neither one of us has time for.

That everything about this situation is messed up.

It all disappears, and for this one moment in time, it's just us and this connection that has nothing to do with the mating bond and everything to do with us.

At least until my phone, sitting on the table next to me, buzzes with a series of texts, shattering the fragile peace between us.

Hudson looks away first, his gaze going to my vibrating phone. And the moment is gone.

"I should get going," Hudson tells me, even as he pulls his hand from mine and pushes back from the table.

"But we haven't finished—"

“We have a week. We can work on it on Sunday.” His tone is clipped as he shoves his stuff into his backpack.

“Yeah, but I cleared the whole evening. I thought—”

“The library closes in a few hours, and I have some more research I want to do on mating bonds. I read some interesting stuff last night, and I want to follow up on it while it’s still fresh in my mind.”

“What kind of stuff?” I ask, completely bewildered by his sudden curttness.

“About people who’ve tried to break them before.” He turns and walks away without a backward glance.

My heart is pounding in my ears. Why does it hurt so much to see another example of how eager he is to break our bond?

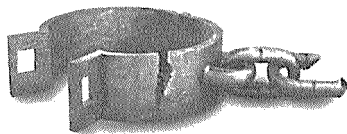
Which...fine. Obviously he can do whatever he wants. I just wish I knew why he has to do it now, when we should be working on this ridiculous project.

Screw it. I stand and start to pack up my stuff as well. If Hudson can work on other things, then so can I. It’s not like I don’t have a million and one different projects due before the end of the school year.

It’s only as I pick up my phone that I remember that someone texted me. I glance down at my lock screen, figuring it’ll be Macy or Uncle Finn or maybe even Heather, who I haven’t talked to in a couple of days. But it isn’t any of them.

Instead, it’s Jaxon. And he answered my joke.

## I Hate What You've Done with the Place



**J**axon: I miss my heart

**Jaxon:** And all the other organs, too?

I fumble the phone in my haste to unlock it, which is ridiculous, I know. He's kept me waiting for more than an hour, but that doesn't matter. All that matters is that he answered me. Maybe he doesn't hate me after all.

**Me:** Tomb it may concern

I figure he won't answer me for another hour—if he even answers at all. But it turns out I'm wrong, because he texts back just as I'm zipping up my backpack.

**Jaxon:** You're getting worse at this

**Me:** Not every joke is gold

**Jaxon:** Apparently not

He's not exactly being forthcoming at the moment, but he isn't ignoring me, either. Figuring that's as good an indicator as any, I decide to press my luck.

**Me:** Can you meet me for a few minutes?

**Me:** I want to talk

Long seconds that feel like hours drag by before I finally get his answer.

**Jaxon:** Yeah. I'm in the tower. Come on up.

It's not a particularly enthusiastic response, but it's more than I was hoping for, so I count it a win. Then practically sprint for the door as I fire off one last text telling him that I'm on my way.

I race up the steps to the tower, taking them two and even three at a time. It leaves me breathless once I hit the top of the last flight of stairs, but I don't care. There has to be a way to make things right with Jaxon and not hurt Hudson in the process. There just has to be, and I am certain it centers around asking the Bloodletter some important questions. And demanding answers.

I take a second to catch my breath before stepping into the antechamber of the tower. Then stop dead as soon as I get my first real look at the room. It looks *nothing* like it usually does.

Normally, there's furniture arranged in an invitation and shelves upon shelves of books and candles and other small knickknacks. Art hangs on the walls, while more books are stacked in piles around the room, and there's a cabinet full of granola bars, Pop-Tarts, and chocolate just for me.

It's my favorite room in the castle, the place where I can just curl up with a snack and a book and the boy I love. What more does a girl need?

But that tower room I loved so much? It's gone now, replaced with doom and gloom to a degree I haven't seen since Lia tried to sacrifice me.

The books are gone, the furniture is gone, and the only art left—an original Monet—has a giant hole through the center of it. In place of furniture is workout equipment. Lots and lots and lots of workout equipment. The center of the room is dominated by a weight-lifting bench with a lot of really heavy weights on the bar. In the corner hangs a very large punching bag that Jaxon must use a lot, judging by how badly dented and crumbling the stone walls on either side of it are.

There's also a heavy-duty treadmill against the wall and an exercise bike near the window.

The room looks nothing like Jaxon—nothing at all like him—and everything inside me trembles in horror as I look over this new setup.

I mean, it's not the new workout equipment itself that is so bad—although Jaxon usually gets his workouts from long runs in the wilderness. It's that this room, which had always seemed like a window into Jaxon's *soul*, has been gutted. There's nothing left of the guy I fell in love with in here, nothing left of who he is or what matters to him. And I hate it.

I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.

I must make a sound, or maybe Jaxon just figures I should be here by now, but the door from his bedroom flies open. I get a quick glimpse through the open doorway before he shuts it again, and his bedroom looks as empty as this room does. No drum set in the corner, no stacks of books. Nothing but his bed, with its black sheets and duvet.

I start to ask him what happened here, but then I realize he's carrying a duffel bag, and everything else flies out of my mind.

"Where are you going?" I demand.

One of his brows goes up at the belligerence in my voice, but he doesn't answer. Just sets his black—of course it is—bag near the top of the stairs and asks, "What did you want to see me about?"

"You didn't answer my question."

Now both his brows are up as he leans back on his heels and crosses his arms over his chest. "You didn't answer mine."

I don't respond, my gaze glued to the bag at the top of the stairs. Maybe it's naive, considering we're on a break or whatever, but I still can't believe Jaxon was going to leave Katmere to go God only knows where—with a suitcase—and didn't even plan to tell me about it.

"Was I just going to wake up tomorrow and you were going to be gone?" I ask, hating how small my voice sounds all of a sudden.

"Don't be dramatic, Grace." His voice is ice-cold. "It's not like I'm leaving for good."

"Well, how would I know that?" I hold my arms out to encompass the room as I spin in a slow circle. "How am I supposed to know anything about you anymore?"

"I don't know." Anger flashes in his eyes. "Maybe if you spent less time with Hudson, you'd have a clue what's going on with somebody, *anybody*, else."

I gasp. "That's not fair. I'm trying to make up enough work to graduate. You know that."

"You're right. I do." He closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, the anger is gone, but so is every other emotion. For the second time today, I can't help thinking that it's like looking into his eyes that first moment we met, when there was absolutely nothing there. "I'm sorry."

He starts to gesture for me to sit down, and I watch as it dawns on him that he no longer has anywhere for me to sit. A weariness comes over him then, and he shoves a hand through his hair as he quietly asks, "What did you need?"

"I'm going to the Bloodletter tomorrow—"

"The Bloodletter?" Suddenly, he sounds alarmed. "Why are you going there?"

"Hudson and I are hoping she can break the mating bond between us. We want you to come with us."

He shoots me a skeptical look. "Hudson wants me to come with you?"

"I want you to come with me. I don't care what Hudson wants."

Jaxon stares at me, his gaze searching my face for I don't know what. But just when I start to think that I've gotten through, that he's going to agree to come with us, he says, "You really should just let this go, Grace. Let me go."

"I can't." There's nothing more for me to say, so I wait. Hope he feels the same way.

But he just shakes his head. "I've already got plans."

"Plans." I look toward the duffel bag that might as well be another elephant in the room.

He sighs. "I've got to go to the Vampire Court for the weekend."

"The Vampire Court?" It's the absolute last thing I expect him to say, especially after everything that happened during the Ludares challenge. "But why?"

"Someone has to keep an eye on Cyrus after that shit Hudson pulled. He may not have raised me, but my father is predictable enough for me to know that he's not going to let what happened on that Ludares field go."

"We all know that. What does that have to do with you going home?"

"I'm bringing the Order with me. We're hoping among all of us, we'll be able to figure out what he's got planned."

"I thought he had a war planned," I tell him. "That's what everyone is saying."

"You don't actually think Cyrus is just going to show up with his faithful army of wolves and made vampires, do you?"

I think about everything I've heard since the challenge—not just from Jaxon and Hudson but from Uncle Finn and Macy and Flint and...everyone, really. "I thought that was what we were preparing for."

"We are. But he won't come at us straight on. Not yet. Not when he has to face Hudson, you, and me, as well as Flint and a whole host of other powerful paranormals."

"So what do you think he's going to do?" I ask, even though I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

"Try to kill two birds with one stone." The look on his face has chills running up and down my spine of the very-not-good variety. "If you think he's going to let Hudson's performance on the challenge field go, you obviously don't know how a megalomaniac like Cyrus thinks. And what better way to hurt Hudson and even the odds for the coming fight than to destroy his mate?"

"Me?" I squeak. "You think he's coming after me?"

"I *know* he's coming after you," he tells me in a voice so deadly that it makes me take a step back, even though I know Jaxon would never hurt me. "I'm not going to let that happen."

This time, when our gazes meet, there's something in his eyes that wasn't there before. Something raw and real and powerful. And that's when I know. Jaxon still cares for me. At least a little.

He may not want to, but he does. More, he's determined to take care of me in his own way—whether that means stepping aside so I can be with Hudson or protecting me from his sociopathic father.

My heart breaks for him, for us—for what was and what could have been. For what still might be if we all play our cards exactly right.

Then, because I know there's no talking him out of his plan, I throw my arms around him and whisper, "Be careful."

He holds me close for the space of one, two, three breaths, then steps away. "I have to go. The Order is waiting for me."

He grabs his duffel bag and starts down the stairs.

I follow him. There are so many things I want to say. And so many things I no longer have the right to say. They all burn on the tip of my tongue, but in the end, I settle for, "Please, Jaxon. Don't do anything rash."

He turns to look at me, and in that moment, it's all there in his eyes. The love, the hate, the sorrow, the joy. And the pain. All the pain. But still, he gives me that crooked grin I fell in love with all those months ago. And whispers, "I'm pretty sure I already have."

I close my eyes as my heart breaks all over again, and when I open them, he's already gone.

As I head back down the stairs and to my room, I can't help a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that this was the last time Jaxon will ever look at me that way again—like I matter to him. Or worse, like anything does.





**M**y alarm goes off at four the next morning, but I'm already awake studying a topographical map of Alaska. Unfortunately, there's no X marks the spot when it comes to the Bloodletter's cave, which means I'm going to have to go from memory—something I'm not looking forward to, since Jaxon is the one who got us there last time, and I was just along for the ride.

I'd been counting on him directing us again this time, but that's not going to happen now, considering he's in London. And since Hudson has never been there corporeally, I need to figure out from memory and this map of the terrain how to find the Bloodletter's cave again. Easy-freaking-peasy.

I know it's several hundred miles away, and I know we started out going northeast, but we made a turn somewhere. I just wish I could remember where...or how long it took us to get there.

My phone vibrates, and I reach for it, ready to respond to Hudson with a text to go back to sleep because we aren't leaving until I can figure this out. But the text isn't from Hudson.

**Jaxon:** Text me if you get lost

He's also sent a series of shots from Google Earth and drawn a red path through the mountains and thawing snow. And, thank God, on the last shot, he put a giant red X over where the Bloodletter's cave should be as well as instructions for how to remove the wards.

**Me:** Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU

**Jaxon:** Don't do anything rash

**Me:** I already have

I take a couple of minutes to trace the path he gave me onto the map, just in case my phone dies while we're out traversing the wilderness. Then I get dressed, which is a production, as always.

It's April now, so temps are finally above freezing for the most part, thank

God—but just barely. Which means tights, leggings, ski pants, and several layers of shirts and socks, as well as my puffy hot-pink coat. I keep thinking about ordering a new one, but it doesn't seem worth it—not if it's going to hurt Macy's feelings. She's hurting more than enough as it is.

I grab my outdoor pack—also hot pink and also courtesy of Macy—and shove some bottles of water into it, along with some granola bars and a few packs of trail mix. Lastly, I pack a large thermos of blood I got last night from the cafeteria for Hudson.

I know he could probably drink once we get to the Bloodletter's, but the last time the two of them met, they didn't get along so well. I'm not sure that she'll offer him refreshments or that he would take them if she did. So a thermos of blood seems like the best move, unless I want to offer Hudson one of my veins.

A little shiver runs through me at the thought. I'm not sure if it's a good shiver or a bad shiver, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't remember that night by my bed when Hudson ran an imaginary fang down the side of my throat. At the time, I was horrified, but now...now it's a lot more intriguing than it used to be.

I'm sure it's just the mating bond, doing what mating bonds do. But I can't help but wonder what it would be like. It couldn't possibly be as intense as it was with Jaxon—I can't imagine anything being that intense—but that doesn't mean I'm not a teeny-tiny bit curious.

A quiet knock sounds on my door just as I zip up my pack, and the distraction of it yanks me out of my wildly inappropriate thoughts about Hudson. Macy knows where I'm going, so I don't bother to text her, and she's finally getting some real sleep, so I'm as quiet as I can possibly be as I let myself out of my room.

Hudson's standing in the hallway with a pack very similar to mine hanging over his shoulder—except it's navy blue and Armani. Big surprise there. Then again, everything he's wearing is Armani, except for the Alaska-weather-certified boots. And if Armani made them, I'm pretty sure he'd be wearing those, too.

"Something on your mind?" he asks as we start down the hall.

"No, why?"

"No reason," he answers. "Except your cheeks are currently the same color as your coat."

His words only make me blush harder—mostly because I’m afraid my earlier thoughts are written all over my face. It’s a good thing reading minds isn’t one of Hudson’s powers...

“I don’t— I can’t— It doesn’t—” I force myself to stop babbling, then take a deep breath and try again. “I was just...exercising. My cheeks always get red when I do.”

He gives me a strange look. “Aren’t we about to get a lot of exercise?”

“Oh, um, yeah.” I resist the urge to bang my head against the nearest wall, mostly because I figure it will only make things worse. I always knew I was a bad liar, but apparently I’m a really, really bad liar. But I’m in it now, so I might as well own it. “I just wanted to do a little warm-up, that’s all.”

“A warm-up?” he repeats, totally deadpan. “Right. Wouldn’t want you to strain anything. Like the truth, for instance?”

I’ve got nothing to say to that, so I don’t. Instead, I start down the hall, tossing over my shoulder, “Are you coming or what?”

“Aren’t we waiting for Prince Jaxon?” He looks in the direction of the tower.

“Be nice,” I admonish him as he catches up to me. “And he had other plans for the weekend, so we’re on our own.”

“Other plans?” Hudson lifts a skeptical brow. “What could possibly be more important to him than this little excursion?”

“He’s going to London—”

“Are you kidding me?” His accent is about a hundred times heavier than it was just a minute ago. “Are you fucking kidding me? What is he thinking? The bloody wanker—”

I lay a hand on his arm, wait until those furious indigo eyes meet mine. “He’s worried about what Cyrus is planning. For both of us.”

“Yeah, well, so am I, but you don’t see me running off to Cyrus’s lair like a bloody chump, do you?” He’s so annoyed that for the first time ever, he walks ahead, leaving me to do a near jog to catch up to him.

“He thinks he’s so bloody clever, thinks he’s ten steps ahead of everyone else. But he doesn’t get it. Cyrus knows he’s a threat. Son or not, he’ll bloody well kill him the second he gets the chance.” Hudson’s rummaging in his bag now, pulling out his phone.

“Of course he gets that. That’s why he went—and why he brought the entire Order with him.”

Hudson pauses with his thumbs over his phone. “He brought all of them? Mekhi? Luca? Liam? Byron and Rafael?”

“Yes, all of them.” I rest a hand on Hudson’s arm, shocked to realize he’s trembling just a little. “I’m worried for him, too, but I talked to him. He knows what he’s walking into.”

“He doesn’t have a bloody clue what he’s walking into.” Hudson’s eyes have turned to ice. “But there’s not an arsed thing I can do about it now, is there?”

Still, he fires off a couple of text messages in quick succession. I don’t expect Jaxon to answer—he’s not exactly in a good place—but, surprisingly, Hudson gets a response back right away.

“What did he say?” I ask.

“I didn’t text him.” He’s back to typing again.

“What do you mean? I thought—”

“I wanted an answer, so I texted Mekhi.” He sees the question in my eyes and nods. “You’re right. He swears he’s got Jaxon’s back—and that they know exactly what they’re doing.”

“Do you believe him?” I ask, studying his face carefully.

“I don’t *not* believe him.” He puts his phone away and zips up his backpack.

I take a deep breath, blow it out slowly. “I guess that will have to be enough, then.”

“It’ll be something,” he tells me, then heads down the stairs without another word.

We don’t talk again until we’re outside. “I forgot to ask. You do know where we’re going, right?”

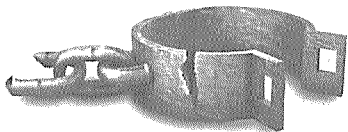
“Jaxon sent me the coordinates. I’ve got it mapped on my phone. And an actual map.”

He grins. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I shoot back, then reach deep inside myself and grab my platinum string.

## 23

## Live and Let Fly



Hudson lets out a very un-Hudson-like whoop as I finish shifting and take to the air. And can I just say? It's so much cooler doing this under my own power as a gargoyle, instead of being carried by Jaxon.

I shoot forward several feet, then call back to Hudson, "Hey, slowpoke. Are you coming?"

"Just giving you a head start," he answers with a grin that is entirely too sexy for my own good. "Figured you might need it."

"I might need it?" I shoot him a look of pure affront. As if. "Last one down the mountain loses."

"Oh yeah?" he asks, and I realize for the first time that he's given up on the so-called head start and is keeping pace with me. He's not fading as much as just running very, very fast. "What do they lose? Or, more specifically, what do *I* win?"

"Oh, really? You're mighty confident there, Mr. Vega," I call down to him. Then I put on a burst of speed to show him that I'm not quite the pushover he thinks I'm going to be.

But it only takes a second for him to catch up to me. "Just being honest, Miss Foster." He grins up at me right before he jumps over a giant boulder in a single leap. "So what am I going to win?"

I laugh as I do a somersault in midair before going straight into a deep, fast dive. I don't stop until I'm hovering a few feet in front and above him. "Loser has to do the entire ethics project on their own."

He lifts a brow. "Not quite what I had in mind, but it'll do." Just to be a show-off, he leapfrogs over me. "For now."

There's something about the way Hudson says *for now* that makes my stomach flip-flop more than a little bit. But before I can try to figure out what that means, he blows me a kiss...and then takes off in full-out fade

mode. The cheater.

I take off after him, flying up at an angle until I'm above the trees. And then I lay on every ounce of speed my wings can muster.

Down below, Hudson is racing through the trees, jumping over snowbanks and racing down rocky, jagged cliffs. I mostly keep pace with him, but it's harder than I thought it would be. I know vampires are fast—I've seen Jaxon and Mekhi fade full-out—but Hudson is seriously fast.

Even though it's a struggle to keep up, I love every second of it. Spring is finally coming to Alaska, and though the temperature is still in the high thirties, the landscape is coming to life all around us. And it is gorgeous.

A lot of the trees are evergreen up here, but as we near the bottom of the mountain and the top layers of snow begin to melt, shoots of green are starting to poke through. Plus, I can see for miles up here, and in places where the snow has begun to melt—where lakes are coming to life—wildflowers are springing up.

Bold and beautiful, they cover the ground in shades of pink and yellow, purple and blue. Part of me wants to stop and smell the flowers—I haven't seen any just growing like this since I left San Diego in early November—but if I do that, I'll lose for sure. And I don't want to lose. Not just because I have zero interest in doing that damn ethics project alone but because the idea of losing to Hudson grates against my pride. It's not losing to a vampire I mind, though. It's losing to *him*. I haven't spent our entire relationship trying to one-up him just to let him beat me now, in our first real competition. No freaking way. The flowers will have to wait.

We're almost to the bottom of the mountain, and Hudson has disappeared into a clump of trees far below me. At first, I don't worry too much about it—it's hard to see someone through a forest of spruce trees, especially when you're flying above them.

But long minutes go by without so much as a glimpse of his bright-blue snow jacket peeking through the trees, and it starts to make me nervous. Really, really nervous.

Not because I think he's ahead of me and I'm worried about losing (although that is certainly a valid concern with Hudson) but because this is freaking Alaska. Anything can happen out here in the middle of the wilderness.

One second of inattention, and you can be lying at the bottom of a ravine

with a concussion or a compound fracture while a bear or pack of wolves tries to eat you.

Or a pissed-off moose might decide to use you as target practice for his antlers.

Or you could be impaled by a giant icicle coming around a curve...the list goes on and on in my head, getting a little more irrational with each second that passes. Admittedly, Hudson is the most dangerous predator on this mountain, despite the very wild wildlife, and I'm sure he can handle himself with them just fine.

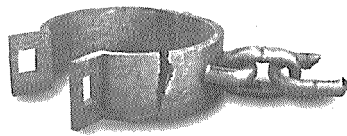
But I still want to see him. Still want to make sure he's okay—and that he hasn't taken a wrong turn somewhere. And if he *has* taken a wrong turn, he could be halfway to Canada or the North Pole by now, and that means we'll never get to the Bloodletter's cave.

It's that thought and not any worry for Hudson that spurs me to fly lower so I can get a better look in between the trees—or at least that's what I tell myself. But no matter how low I fly, I can't see any sign of him.

Worry settles into my stomach, as heavy and unignorable as one of those giant boulders he's been jumping over ever since we left Katmere, and I prepare to drop almost to the top of the trees. I could text him, see if he answers. Service isn't the best out here, but we aren't that far from Denali National Park, so maybe—

I scream as something broadsides me out of nowhere and sends me spinning straight toward the ground.

## Beauty and All the Beasts



I have a split second to think of bears and mountain lions, wolves and lynx, as my scream echoes across the snowy mountain, before it registers that I'm being held by a (very) strong pair of arms. And that the spin I'm currently in is definitely controlled.

Hudson. Not in trouble but deliberately hiding. The jerk.

"Let me go!" I screech, even as I reach out with a balled-up fist and punch him in the shoulder as hard as I can.

In my human form, I know he would just laugh at such a blow, but my gargoyle stone packs a lot more of a wallop than my human hand does, and Hudson actually grunts in pain. What he doesn't do, however, is loosen his grip on me. At all.

"What are you doing?" I cry out as we finally stop spinning.

"Hitching a ride," he answers with a wicked grin that is somehow both extremely charming and extremely suspicious.

"Don't you mean cheating?" I shoot back.

"I suppose it all depends on your perspective." His breath is hot against my ear, and it sends all kinds of sensations careening through me. Sensations I have no business feeling for the brother of the guy I love, even if we are broken up.

"Considering you're the one tagging along for the ride, I'm pretty sure my perspective is the only one that matters," I mutter. Still, I stop struggling against his ridiculously strong hold. Not because I've given up but because there's no other way to lull him into a false sense of security. The second our feet hit the ground, he's not going to have a clue what *hit* him.

Except we never actually touch down on the ground. Instead, Hudson drops us onto the top branch of one of the tallest cedar trees around.

"Stop fighting me," he says once he's got us balanced properly on the



branch. "Or we're both going to end up falling out of this thing—and gargoyles are a hell of a lot more breakable than vampires."

"If you want me to stop, you should let go of me!" I answer as I struggle against him, preparing to rack him if I have to.

"Okay." He lets go abruptly, and sure enough, I start to tumble straight off the branch.

The fact that I squawk like a chicken and grab on to him for dear life is something neither of us is going to forget for a long time—him, because it means he was right, and me, because there's no way he'll let me forget.

We're face-to-face now, so close that we're pretty much breathing the same air—which is not okay on a whole bunch of levels. Hudson must feel the same way, because he takes a step back. But this time, he keeps one firm hand on me so that I don't do my best impression of a Weeble Wobble.

And can I just say that it's really hard to balance on a tree branch at the best of times, let alone when you are made of stone? Which is why I say to hell with the whole gargoyle thing at the moment and reach inside for my platinum string.

Seconds later, I'm human again, which is way better when it comes to being able to balance properly. It's so much easier, in fact, that I actually feel comfortable taking a couple of steps away from Hudson, until my back is resting against the tree trunk.

As I do, I get my first good look at Hudson since he grabbed me. And he looks...good. Really good, with the wind blowing through his silky brown hair and a touch of color from the sun and wind kissing his normally pale cheeks. The giant grin doesn't hurt, either, along with a lightness in his eyes that I've never seen before.

I don't know if the changes are just because we're outdoors and having a little bit of fun for what feels like the first time in forever or if it's because he's finally close to getting rid of me.

"Hey, where'd you go?" he asks, and the lightness in his eyes clouds over.

"Just thinking." I smile, even though it's a lot harder than it was just a few moments ago.

His brows draw together. "What about?"

I don't have an answer to that question, at least not one I want to share with him. So after I look him over, I say the only thing I can think of. "I guess I'm just wondering why you've got one of your hands behind your back

when you had no trouble grabbing me with both of them when you dragged me out of the air.”

“Oh, that.” Even more color floods his cheeks.

I narrow my eyes suspiciously, preparing to shift into a gargoyle again at the first hint of another dirty trick. But then he pulls his hand out from behind his back, and I realize he’s carrying a small bouquet of wildflowers in all the shades of the rainbow.

He holds it out to me with a small smile and watchful eyes. And I melt.

“You picked flowers for me?” I gasp, eagerly reaching out to take them.

“They reminded me of you.” He puts his tongue firmly in his cheek. “Especially the bright-pink ones.”

But I’m so overwhelmed by the gesture—no one has ever hand-picked a bouquet for me before—that I don’t rise to the very obvious bait. Instead, I bury my face in the flowers and inhale the scent of spring after a long, long, long winter.

Nothing has ever smelled so good.

“They’re amazing,” I say and watch the uncertainty on his face fade away. Impulsively, I throw my arms around him in a hug.

“Thank you so much,” I whisper in his ear. “I love them more than anything.”

“Yeah?” he asks, pulling away just a little so he can see my face.

“Yeah,” I answer.

He smiles. “Good.” Suddenly, his eyes widen, and he pulls me closer to him, even as he turns me around.

“What—”

“Look!” he whispers and points out across the huge ravine we’re on the precipice of.

I follow where he’s pointing and gasp, because on the ground, barely thirty feet in front of us, is a giant brown mama bear and her two half-grown cubs. The mom is lying in the sun, watching as her cubs tussle and tumble over each other.

Ears get pulled and tails get nipped, but their claws stay firmly sheathed as they roll around the ground together. And, I realize with delight, bear hugs are absolutely a real thing.

Hudson laughs when one of the cubs trips over a fallen tree and goes rolling down the shallow edge of the ravine and her sibling goes tumbling

after her. When they don't immediately climb out of the ravine—choosing instead to roughhouse up and down its slippery, craggy slopes, Mama Bear roars her annoyance and walks over to investigate.

The bears climb out pretty quickly once she growls at them from the edge of the ravine, and then the three of them lumber away.

"That was ..." Hudson breaks off with a shake of his head.

"Incredible? Awe-inspiring? Amazing?" I fill in the blanks for him.

I don't know how long we stand there, checking out the truly breathtaking view of snow-covered mountains meeting a canyon covered in wildflowers.

Long enough for the bears to finally wander fully out of sight.

Long enough for a bald eagle to swoop across the canyon on a powerful gust of wind.

More than long enough for me to become aware of the hardness of Hudson's long, lean body pressed against my back, his fingers resting lightly on my waist to steady me.

As the eagle, too, disappears from view, Hudson pulls slowly away from me. I want to protest, want to grab on to his hands and hold him in place for just a few more minutes. For just a little longer. There's something so peaceful about standing up here at what feels like the top of the world, looking over land that has been untouched by humans for centuries...maybe even forever.

It's awe-inspiring, but it's also humbling. And a reminder that no matter how grave my problems are, they're only a momentary blip in the grand scheme of things. The world turned for a long time before I was born, and it will keep turning no matter how long Hudson's and my immortality lasts... provided climate change doesn't destroy it all before then, of course.

"We should get going," he says, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like that he sounds as reluctant as I feel.

"I know," I answer with a sigh. Then I hand him my flowers. "Will you tuck these in the side pocket of my backpack? I don't want them to fall out when I fly."

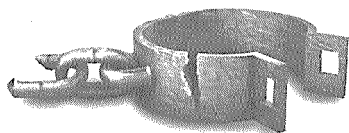
He doesn't say anything, but he seems pleased as he does what I asked, zipping the pocket snug around the flowers' stems so that only the blooms stick out. He holds on to one stem, however, with several clusters of white flowers in it.

I start to ask him what he's going to do with it, but the words turn to dust in my mouth as he leans forward and slowly, carefully weaves the flowers

through the windswept curls that aren't tucked into my hat.

"How do they look?" I ask, tilting my head so he can get a better view of the flowers.

"Beautiful." But he's not looking at the flowers when he answers. He's looking at me...and somehow that makes everything better and worse, all at the same time.



## Follow the Blood-Soaked Road

The rest of the trip to the Bloodletter's cave is uneventful. A storm is moving in—I can feel it in the damp air all around us—so we travel fast, without any more rest breaks.

I check Jaxon's directions on the fly, and as expected, they're right on. All of which means we get to the Bloodletter's faster than I thought we might, and as we stand on the icy ground directly above her cave, me downing a granola bar while Hudson drinks from his thermos of blood, I can't help wondering if we should wait a while before trying to enter. It's barely noon, and I don't know if she's napping...or maybe enjoying a particularly fresh lunch.

Just the thought turns my stomach a little as I search for the opening to the cave, but it is what it is. And since this is my world now—especially considering I've been mated to two vampires at this point—I need to get used to the whole drinking-blood thing. Or, if not used to it, at least comfortable to the point where it doesn't traumatize me every time I think about them feeding from humans.

"The entrance is over here," Hudson calls, pointing to a small opening at the base of the mountain. Since the snow is melting, it's thankfully no longer hidden behind a giant snowbank like it was when I came with Jaxon, which makes it a lot easier to find *and*, more importantly, to access.

I cross over to where he's standing, then crouch down and prepare to enter the cave. "Ready?" I ask over my shoulder.

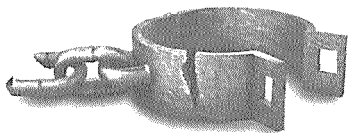
But Hudson's hand snakes out to stop me. "You forgot the safeguards. If we don't disable them first, they'll fry us alive."

Horror sweeps through me as I realize that he's right. I hand him my phone and say, "Jaxon sent instructions to remove them here."

He does a few complicated moves with his hands, then reaches for mine and says, "Come on. Let's get this over with."

He tugs me to him and then walks with me straight through the entrance of the cave. He keeps my hand in his as we start down the steep, slippery path that will eventually lead us to the Bloodletter's antechamber. I'm expecting the same long, challenging, and slightly gruesome walk as before, but this time is different.

Because as soon as we make it around the first curve, she's right there waiting for us, with her green eyes blazing and a grumpy frown on her face.



## Why Can't You B Positive?

“**M**aybe I wasn’t as smooth getting through those safeguards as I thought,” Hudson tells me in an aside, even as he shifts to put his body in front of mine. It’s a move that should piss me off—I am a gargoyle, after all, and more than capable of defending myself.

Then again, the Bloodletter is basically the oldest and most powerful vampire in existence. Something tells me she won’t need to rely on her powers if she wants to make me bleed...or break me into pieces.

So, just this once, I don’t complain about him stepping in front of me. Especially since this position means I get to watch his back—just in case, you know, she decides she wants to break *him* into pieces instead of me.

“You unraveled the safeguards perfectly and you know it,” the Bloodletter snaps at him. “Which makes me wonder if Jaxon has been telling tales.” Her tone says that there will be hell to pay if he has.

I start to jump in to defend Jaxon, but Hudson beats me to the punch...and lies. “Do you honestly think I need my little brother’s help to get through a few measly protections?”

Her laser-green gaze locks with his, and she looks nothing like the sweet old grandmother I originally mistook her for and a lot more like the deadly predator she actually is. “Those *measly protections* are the strongest in existence.”

Hudson never even blinks as he answers, “Oops.”

My stomach climbs into my throat, but the Bloodletter doesn’t move. For long seconds, I’m not even sure she breathes. She just tilts her head and studies him, like he’s a bug under a microscope and she’s contemplating pulling off his wings.

Or wondering how he’ll look draining into her blood bucket.

“Interesting that you would lie to me, Mr. Vega.” Her eyes narrow on Hudson. “Very interesting.”

Just when I'm beginning to think *Dead Man Walking* refers to a lot more than a book title, her too-bright gaze flicks over to me. And my stomach goes from my throat to my toes.

"Grace, my dear. It's so nice to see *you* again." The subtle emphasis she puts on the word "you" doesn't go unnoticed by Hudson or me.

"It's nice to see you, too." I give her the best smile I can muster, considering I'm pretty sure there's no chance Hudson is getting out of this cave alive.

"Come here so I can see you, child. It's been too long." She holds out a hand to me.

And my mouth feels like it's full of cotton, my mind racing with how many times Jaxon has warned me over and over to never, ever touch her, that she hates to be touched.

"It's been six weeks," Hudson tells her flatly—right before he moves to block me as I start to come behind him.

"Like I said. Too long." She continues to smile, continues to hold out her hand. But there's a look in her eyes now that warns me disobedience won't be tolerated.

It's not a good start to the visit, especially since I'm hoping to convince her to help us. But why does she want to touch me now? Is this a trick? Is it a test? Well, if it's a test, I decide, I have every intention of passing. This visit is too important.

It's my turn to give a warning look. But mine is directed at Hudson as I shove his arm out of the way. He responds with a low growl, but he doesn't try to block me again.

I move past him, pull in a deep breath, and take the Bloodletter's hand.

I only have a second to register that her eyes are swirling green orbs as we touch; then I kind of freeze as she pulls me in for a hug, like I'm some long-lost relative or something. I'm so confused—this isn't the kind of relationship we had last time—until Hudson snarls, and I realize that this performance isn't for me. It's for him. Part boast and part threat, all payback.

"I thought I warned you that he was the dangerous brother," she murmurs to me. And though her voice is soft, I know very well that she means for Hudson to hear.

Also, she's not wrong.

"You did," I answer as she releases me. "But there have been some developments."



“Developments.” Her eyes gleam with interest. “Do these developments have anything to do with my Jaxon not being with you?”

Hudson snorts—whether at my use of the word “developments” or her use of a possessive pronoun to describe Jaxon, I don’t know. But I count my blessings when he doesn’t say anything...and when she does nothing more than lift a brow at his rudeness. Not that I know exactly what she could do to him, but I wouldn’t put it past her to smite him, or whatever it’s called when a vampire as powerful as she is unleashes her power.

“Yes.” I answer quickly, before Hudson can do anything else to upset her.

She looks between us, like she’s weighing her options. Finally, with a sigh, she turns back toward the depths of the cave. “Well then, you’d better come in, shouldn’t you?”

She starts down the steep, frozen path that leads into the antechamber and, after exchanging a look of our own, Hudson and I follow her.

As we do, I worry about the Bloodletter slipping and breaking a hip or something as she makes her way back toward her sitting room. I have a terrible time navigating this trail, and I’m a lot younger than she is. But she must do the walk more frequently than I give her credit for, because she never hesitates—even in the most dangerous spots.

Still, I breathe a sigh of relief when we finally make it down to the main level of the cave. We pass through the doorway I remember, and I brace myself for what I’ll see. Not going to lie, the bucket of blood that was sitting there last time still shows up in my nightmares occasionally, and I’m not thrilled at the possibility of seeing it again.

I tell myself not to look as we start across the antechamber toward the door to her main quarters, but in the end, I can’t help myself. And once I do... Oh. My. God.

I don’t say anything, but I must make some kind of sound because both Hudson and the Bloodletter turn to look at me—Hudson with alarm, the Bloodletter with a strange kind of fascination that doesn’t make sense at all.

“I wasn’t expecting visitors,” she says mildly as she parades us by the two human corpses currently hanging upside down from hooks in the corner. Their throats are slit, and they’re draining into two large buckets.

Her words aren’t an apology, and I get it. I do. I don’t apologize to anyone when I walk into the grocery store and buy chicken breasts. Why should this be any different? Well, except for *two people being dead*. And I don’t normally—and

by normally, I mean ever—get to see my food in such a natural state.

My stomach rolls.

Hudson moves so he's between the corpses and me, his hand coming up to rest on the small of my back in what I'm pretty sure is supposed to be a gesture of comfort. But it only makes me nervous, considering the Bloodletter's scrutiny of both of us. I don't pull away, though.

We move past the large buckets—which I note with some horror are nearly overflowing at this point—and she waves a hand to unlock the door that leads to her main apartment.

"Sit, sit," she says as she gestures to the black couch facing an illusion of a roaring fire. "I'll be with you in just a second."

Hudson and I do as we're told, and I can't help noticing that she's redecorated from the last time I was here. Before, the couch was a warm harvest gold, facing two wingback chairs in deep red like the poppies in the painting over the fireplace. Now, everything in the room is black and gray with accents of white. Even the art on the wall is in shades of gray, with only a couple of bold slashes of red.

"I like what you've done with the place," Hudson tells her as we settle onto the couch. "It's very...serial-killer chic."

I kick him, hard, but he just makes a face at me, the picture of innocence—as long as you don't count the wicked glint in his eyes.

When she finally moves to sit in the black rocking chair opposite the couch, the Bloodletter is carrying an elegant crystal goblet filled with what I can only assume is blood. My stomach clenches, and I think I'm going to be sick. Which is bizarre—I see the vamps drink blood at school all the time. Why should this be any different?

Except the vamps at Katmere drink animal blood. And the animals it comes from aren't hanging in the corner of the dining hall as they partake...

For a while, she doesn't say anything. Instead, she just watches us over the rim of her goblet. I can't help feeling like that mouse in *The Lion King*—when Scar plays with it, letting it run through his claw, and everyone watching knows its life is completely in his hands.

But then she blinks, and she looks like a little old grandma again. Especially when she smiles and says, "Okay, dearies. Tell me everything."



“Grace is my mate,” Hudson blurts out, even as I’m racking my brain, trying to decide where to start.

“Is she now?” The Bloodletter doesn’t seem particularly surprised by the statement, which alarms me—at least until she asks, “What makes you think that?” and I realize she doesn’t believe him.

He lifts a brow. “The mating bond that’s currently connecting us is a pretty good indicator.”

Surprise flashes in her eyes, but it’s gone as quickly as it came. As she continues to study us with an impassive gaze, I can’t help wondering what it is that surprises her—the fact that Hudson and I are now mates? Or that he refuses to bow and scrape to her and instead meets her as an equal?

I’m pretty sure there aren’t many people who do that—and by *not many*, I mean none. Even Jaxon, who she raised, treats her with deference and maybe even a little bit of fear. But Hudson doesn’t. I don’t know if that means he’s reckless or if he really is just as powerful as she is.

“How exactly does that work?” the Bloodletter asks as she sips her blood. “Considering I know for a fact that there’s a bond between Grace and Jaxon.”

“A bond you gave him a spell to sever,” Hudson tells her.

“Did I?” She takes a sip from her goblet. “I can’t seem to recall—”

“At your age, I’m sure there’s a lot you don’t recall,” Hudson comments. “But try to remember this, if you wouldn’t—”

“Be careful how you speak to me,” she snaps, as quick and biting as a cobra. But then she seems to catch herself and settles back with a demure smile. Even as she continues: “Or those two unfortunate hikers won’t be the only ones I drain dry today.”

Hudson yawns. He actually yawns, and now I’m thinking he’s not so much brave as really, *really* reckless.

As for the Bloodletter, I'm pretty sure she's trying to decide whether to drain him or flambé him into a nice Hudson Jubilee.

"So if I actually gave him the spell like you say I did—"

"Oh, you gave it to him," Hudson tells her.

"If I. Did," she repeats in a voice like steel, "shouldn't you just say *thank you*?" she asks with narrowed eyes. "Considering how you benefited from it?"

"You think I should thank you?" Hudson hisses. "For screwing up our lives this badly? For destroying my brother—"

"If he chose to use the spell, I can't imagine why he would be destroyed."

"He didn't use the spell," I tell her, trying to ignore the way Hudson's words make me feel. I know everything is screwed up, I know he doesn't want to be mated to me any more than I want to be mated to him, but hearing him say it like that—like being my mate is the worst thing to ever happen to him—hurts in a way I didn't expect it to.

"Someone else did," Hudson says. "But that's not really the point here, is it? What I want to know is how you knew the spell to break the bond in the first place."

"Why does it matter? Unless..." She studies us, cold calculation laid bare in her eyes. "Unless you're here because you want me to break your bond, too."

"That *is* what we want," I tell her before Hudson can say anything—partly because I don't want him to piss her off and screw this up and partly because I don't want to hear him talk any more about how awful our bond is. "And we also want to find a way to fix Jaxon's and my bond."

"Really?" The Bloodletter turns mocking eyes on Hudson. "Is that really what you want? To tie up Grace and Jaxon's mating bond in a nice little bow?"

Now I'm the one looking between them, as a million different undercurrents sweep through the room. I feel like a child because I can't figure out either of them.

"I want Grace and my brother to be happy," he tells her through gritted teeth.

"And you think repairing their bond will do that?" She takes another sip of blood, even as she contemplates him over the rim of her goblet.

"They were happy before," Hudson grinds out.

"They were," she agrees. "But if they really love each other, does it matter if there's a mating bond or not?"

"It does if the mating bond in question has her mated to me."

"I'm sorry," I interrupt in a voice that is anything but nice. "But can I be a part of this conversation? You know, considering it is literally about the rest of *my* life."

"Of course, Grace." The Bloodletter is all magnanimous sweetness as she looks at me. "What is it that you want, dear?"

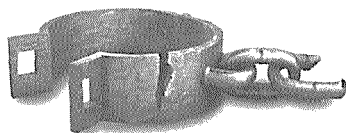
It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to trip over my tongue in the face of that laser-eyed scrutiny. Be careful what you wish for and all that... But in the end, I manage to pull it together and say, "I want to be mated to Jaxon again." I make sure not to look at Hudson as I say it.

The Bloodletter studies me for a while, as if trying to assess the truth of my statement. In the end, though, she just gives me a sad smile as she shakes her head. "Well then, I'm sorry to say that your trip was for nothing. I can't break your and Hudson's bond, and I definitely, definitely can't fix the one between you and Jaxon."

"Why not?" I plead. "You did it once—"

"Because, Grace dear, once broken, some things can never unbreak." She gives a sympathetic little smile. "I only knew how to break yours with Jaxon because I'm the one who created it."

## Today's Forecast: A Deep Freeze



**M**y heart is thundering in my chest. “What do you mean you *created* it?” “*That’s* what was wrong with it,” Hudson interrupts, a dawning horror invading his eyes. “I knew it didn’t look right, green twisted with black. I just...” He shakes his head as if to clear it. “I never imagined that it was off because it should never have existed in the first place.”

The Bloodletter shrugs. “Should or should not aren’t concepts people with power tend to think about much.”

“Yeah, well, they need to,” I tell her as all the pain and fear and sadness of the last few weeks well up inside me until it feels like I’m about to be ripped to shreds.

“Come now, Grace.” This time when she smiles, I can see the tips of her razor-sharp fangs. “You have quite a bit of power yourself. As does your...” She waves a dismissive hand. “Mate. Are you telling me you don’t ever use it to benefit the people you care about?”

“How exactly do you think you bloody benefited anyone in this situation?” Hudson demands. “All you did was fuck everything up.” His accent is so heavy that “fuck” comes out sounding like an entirely different word.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” she snaps in a voice more frigid than the ice all around us.

“Yeah, well, I was definitely talking to *you*. What kind of monster plays God with four people’s lives—”

“Four?” I interrupt, confused.

He’s so busy glaring at the Bloodletter that he doesn’t even glance my way, still speaking directly to the Bloodletter. “Did it ever occur to you that Jaxon has a real mate out there somewhere? One he would never even look for because he was already mated to Grace?”

His words sink like stones into the air around us, and I forget how to

breathe. How to think. How to be. Oh my God. This can't be happening. Oh my God.

For the first time, the Bloodletter looks furious. Pure, unadulterated rage pours out of her as she points a finger at Hudson. "Are you worried about Jaxon's imaginary mate?" she asks. "Or are you worried about yourself?"

"That's the problem with people who abuse their power," he snarls. "They don't like to think about what they've done. And they can't stand it when someone calls them on it."

"Don't you think you're being a little sanctimonious, considering you're Cyrus Vega's son?" she accuses, and now her fangs are completely bared.

As are Hudson's.

"It's because I am his son that I recognize abuse of power when I see it," he answers, and the way he raises his hands makes me wonder if he plans on strangling her.

The Bloodletter sighs and waves a dismissive hand at him again. But this time, Hudson freezes. Like full-on freezes, snarl on his face, eyes narrowed, hands still raised.

"What did you do?" I demand, the accusation coming out before I can think better of it. "What did you do to him?"

"He's fine," she assures me. "But he wouldn't be if he kept talking, so really, I did him a favor."

I don't even know what I'm supposed to say to that, so I just carefully ask, "Will you eventually unfreeze him?"

"Of course." She makes a face. "Believe me when I say that the last thing I want cluttering up my home is a statue of Hudson Vega."

"He's not a statue," I tell her. "He's—"

"I know exactly what he is. And I'm bored with it." She gestures to the chair next to hers. "You, however, I'd like to talk to for a while. So why don't you come sit by me?"

I'd rather sit next to hungry bears than sit next to her now—or ever—but it's not like I have much choice. Besides, sitting where I am doesn't make me any safer if she could freeze Hudson with nothing but a wave of her hand.

I don't want to risk setting her off and getting both of us frozen, so I settle gingerly into the rocking chair next to hers.

"What do you think about all this, Grace?" she asks as soon as I'm seated.

"I don't know what I think." I keep looking at Hudson, worrying about

him, willing him to unfreeze. Is this what Jaxon and Macy and Uncle Finn felt when I was frozen in stone all those months? This helplessness and all-consuming fear? He's only been frozen about three and a half minutes, and I'm ready to crawl out of my skin. I can't imagine how they handled three and a half months.

"I remember seeing Jaxon's and my mating bond." I think back to that night in the laundry room, to the green-and-black string that looked so different from the others. "I didn't realize at the time that something was wrong with it, but looking back, I can tell that it wasn't like any other string I have. Especially now that I've seen the bond between Hudson and me."

"Seriously, Grace?" She sighs at the mention of Hudson's and my bond. "You couldn't have made a better choice?"

"I don't think I've had much choice in any of this," I tell her. "It seems like all the choices have been made for me."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Like I want to rip someone's head off." Again, the words come out before I think to censor them, so I end up backtracking. "Of course, not yours. I just—"

"Don't ever soften what you feel, Grace. Own it," she tells me. "Use it."

"Like you did?" I ask.

The Bloodletter doesn't answer right away. Instead, she studies me for what feels like forever before sighing. "I want to tell you a story."

"Okay," I say, like I have a choice.

"It starts before you were born," she tells me. "Long before you were born, actually, but for now we'll concentrate on the more recent past."

She takes a drawn-out sip from her goblet, then sets it on the coffee table in front of us. "Nineteen years ago, a coven of witches came to me in the middle of the worst snowstorm Alaska had seen for nearly fifty years. They were terrified, desperate. Worried for the fate of their coven and the world, both human and paranormal."

She's staring into the fire now, the look on her face more pained than I have ever seen it.

"What did they want?" I ask when she doesn't immediately offer any more information.

"They wanted help finding a way to bring gargoyles back. It had been more than a thousand years since one was born, nearly that long since one



had roamed the earth, and without the balance gargoyles bring to us, the paranormal world was spinning rapidly out of control. It had gotten so bad that it was affecting the human world, and that was endangering us all. Or so they argued.”

“But there was another gargoyle alive,” I tell her. “The Unkillable Beast—”

“You figured that out, did you?” She smiles. “Smart girl.”

“I can hear him in my head. When I’m in danger, he talks to me.”

“He talks to you?” And just that quickly, she’s focused back on me, her eyes glowing that eerie green again. “What does he say?”

“He warns me. Of course, he doesn’t talk to me all the time—only when I’m in danger. He tells me not to do something or not to trust someone.”

“Does he, now?” She crooks a brow. “You’re a very lucky girl, Grace.”

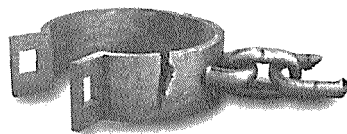
“I know,” I tell her, even though I don’t feel very lucky—haven’t felt lucky in a long, long time.

“Several witches and warlocks came to me in that coven—including your father. I talked to them all, *and* I talked to your mother, who wasn’t a witch but whom I could sense carried magic within her. And I knew, instantly, that you would be of the utmost importance to us later.”

“Because I’m a gargoyle?” I ask through my suddenly too-tight throat. I don’t know if it’s because she’s talking about my parents or if it’s because she’s finally telling me about myself—even though it feels a little like I’m being sold a bill of goods. Like I’m at one of those fake fortune-tellers who just give people what they want to hear.

She clicks her tongue at the interruption but continues anyway. “Because of who you really are.”

## Less Grandmother and More Grand Master



I wait for her to say more, and when she doesn't, I whisper, "I don't know what that means."

Her smile is placid. "Don't worry—you will."

"But what does this have to do with Jaxon? With my bond?"

"I agreed to help the witches, but I asked a favor in return." She sighs heavily.

A chill creeps through me. "I don't understand. What kind of favor?"

"That this child I promised them would come, this gargoyle who they so desperately wanted and who would have so much power in her own right, that she would be mated to my Jaxon...if she wanted."

"Before I found my real mate, you mean." I barely get the words out as horror sweeps through me and my gaze darts to Hudson.

"No, you would be destined to mate with Jaxon—until you touched and refused him." She smiles now. "But you didn't refuse the bond, did you?"

Her words swim in my head, looking for the nearest shore. "Does that mean Jaxon wouldn't mate with anyone else, either, until we met?"

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Well, of course, dear. How else could I insure you at least had a chance to become my Jaxon's mate if he was already mated before you met?"

Oh my God. I feel sick. If I was right and the guy Flint had been talking about, the one he'd been in love with his whole life, was Jaxon... That means, all this time, Flint's heart was breaking, thinking Jaxon wouldn't choose him—when all this time, he *couldn't*. Because of me.

I wrap my arms around my waist, the walls of the room closing in as I take a shallow breath. "So it was *all* fake? Nothing I felt for Jaxon was real?"

"Did it feel fake?" she asks and leans over to pat my hand.

I think of his eyes, of his smile. Of the way he touched me. And some

of the pressure building in my chest starts to ease. “No. No, it didn’t feel fake at all.”

“Because it wasn’t fake,” she tells me with a shrug. “You know the mating bond rules—”

“You broke all the rules!”

“No.” She holds up an emphatic finger. “I bent a few rules, but I didn’t break any. I created a mating bond for you, but if you weren’t open to it—if Jaxon wasn’t open to it—you two never would have mated and would have been free to find your true mates. It’s as simple as that.”

It doesn’t feel simple. None of this feels simple. Even before a new and horrible thought pierces the whirling kaleidoscope of my thoughts.

“What if we’d never met? Would Jaxon—would he have spent the rest of his immortal life alone?”

“That would never have happened. I used an ancient magic that calls like to like. It was inexorably drawing you to Katmere, to Jaxon, from the day you were born.” Something close to kindness enters her green eyes.

I drop my head into my hands and fight the tears burning against the backs of my eyes. But I’m not going to do this. I’m not going to cry, not here and definitely not now. I won’t give her that satisfaction.

“Grace.” Her hand hovers over my arm like she wants to touch me again, and her eyes are softer than I’ve ever seen them.

Neither makes me feel better.

I push out of the chair and walk toward Hudson with some vague idea of convincing her to unfreeze him now that she seems to have mellowed out a little bit. But before I can, the one question I’ve had from the start—the one question that’s been burning inside me from the moment she admitted she manufactured the bond—bursts out of me.

“I just don’t understand why you did it. Not to me, because I get that. I was just a commodity to them, a bargaining chip to you. But what about Jaxon? You raised him. You trained him. He loves you. So why would you do something like this, something that had the potential to hurt him this much?”

“Do you remember what Jaxon was like when you met him?” the Bloodletter asks.

An image of his frozen black eyes flashes through my mind. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“He’d closed himself off a long time before you were born. Maybe I was

too harsh in raising him or maybe it was just the product of having those two people as biological parents. I don't know. I thought giving him a mate might undo some of that, or at least make up for it.

"And it wasn't just for him, you know. You were supposed to be the last gargoyle in existence, that poor creature in the cave notwithstanding—" She stops for a second to clear her throat and to finish off her drink. "I knew that you would need his protection. That you would need Katmere and everything that Finn and he could give you."

Her eyes are steady on mine when she adds, "I did it for both of you, Grace. Because you needed each other."

There's a part of me that hears the truth in her words. That flashes back to that first day at Katmere, when I was so lost and hurting. When I realized Jaxon was the same.

She said I needed the protection of Katmere—does that mean that the Bloodletter told Lia about me, knowing that she would kill my parents, and I would end up at Katmere?

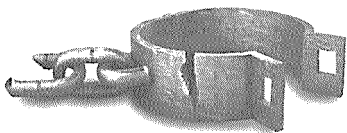
It's a terrible suspicion, one that makes my blood boil and my skin crawl, but then I realize she would have no need to do this. If the magic of our bond truly would have eventually drawn us together.

I turn away and see Hudson, his perfect face frozen in time. And wonder, just for a moment, if we were supposed to be mates all along. If, in a different world where millennia-old vampires didn't do whatever they wanted, would we have been meant for each other after all?

I rub my chest as I swear I can feel a new crack slicing through my already bruised and abused heart.

I reach for Hudson, wanting the comfort—the solace—that comes from the feel of his skin against mine, even if it's just for a second. But the moment my fingers brush his, something miraculous happens.

His fingers grab on to mine and squeeze, even as he blinks away whatever spell has been holding him frozen and immobile for the last fifteen minutes.



## Who Needs Plausible as Long as You've Got Deniability?

I gape at Hudson for a second—totally shocked that he's somehow come out of whatever trance the Bloodletter put him in. I glance behind me to see if she decided to let him go, but she looks as surprised as I am.

She covers it quickly, and that's when I start moving, putting myself between Hudson and her. I expect him to come out of whatever this was gunning for her, and the only chance I have of stopping him is putting myself directly in his path. Because I don't know much about anything, but I do know that Hudson will never, ever risk hurting me. Which means maybe, just maybe, I'll have a chance to save this mess before it goes completely off the rails.

Except Hudson isn't anywhere near as livid as I expect him to be. He's annoyed, sure, but he was annoyed right before she froze him, and I figured the whole forced-statue thing would ratchet that up about two hundred notches. Instead, he's just looking at us like he's expecting an answer to a question.

I look back at the Bloodletter again, and this time she gives me her most grandmotherly smile. "He can't remember, dear."

"Remember what?" Hudson asks as he looks back and forth between us.

I should tell him—he's got a right to know what just went on—but if I do, all hell will break loose. So I'm definitely operating on a *don't-need-to-know* basis.

"Nothing," I say.

I'll tell him what happened later, when we're safely away from this cave. He'll be mad at me, but he'll get over it. And I'll be relieved he didn't piss her off so much that she decided to use him as her own personal chew toy.

It's a win-win-nobody-dies situation.

And yes, I'm more than aware that my standards for win-win situations have deteriorated significantly since I got to Katmere Academy, but now isn't

exactly the time to address that.

"I don't care what you have to do," Hudson tells the Bloodletter, "but you need to break Grace's and my mating bond."

She looks at him questioningly. "I thought you were just chastising me for playing God."

"And you were telling me that power demands to be abused," he shoots back. "So go ahead. Abuse it one more time and get us all out of this bloody damn clusterfuck."

For a minute, I think the Bloodletter is going to explode over being ordered around, which really, really makes me want to drag Hudson into the corner and insist that he stop pushing her. I mean, I know he wasn't privy to the conversation she and I just had, but still. He acts like he's wanting her to come after him.

Or like he really, really wants to destroy our mating bond.

That thought cascades through me like a boulder. I knew before we came here that Hudson didn't want to be mated to me, thought it was all a cosmic joke. But now that I know he was likely always meant to be my true mate, well, it feels like an even bigger kick to the gut.

"You need to learn a little respect," she tells him with a glare.

"Give me something to respect and I'll be happy to," he shoots back with a glare of his own.

Not going to lie, I almost ducked at that one. Because I'm still not convinced smiting isn't a thing.

But instead of ripping him limb from limb with her millennia-old power, the Bloodletter picks up her goblet and all but glides to the small bar made entirely of ice on the other side of the room. Once there, she very slowly, very carefully pours herself another cup of blood and takes a long sip.

When she turns around, the flames in her eyes are banked, though her mouth is still tight and her shoulders very, very stiff. "So," she murmurs, and now she's back to watching us like a dangerous cat with a very small mouse.

Which doesn't make me nervous at all.

"You really want to break your mating bond?"

I'm reconsidering, half based on what she told me and half on the survival instinct deep inside me that's screaming for us to get the hell out of here.

But Hudson is all in, saying, "That is why we came. Jaxon and Grace don't deserve this."

“What about what you deserve?” She makes the question sound like a threat.

“I know exactly what I deserve,” he answers. “But thank you so much for your concern.”

She gives a little shrug, makes a face that can roughly be translated to: *your inanity isn't my problem*. And says, “There is a way you can maybe, *maybe* break this bond.”

“And that is?” Hudson prompts.

“The Crown.”

“The what?” I ask, but Hudson must know exactly what she’s talking about because his whole face has gone flat.

“It doesn’t exist,” he tells her.

“Sure it does.” She looks down, checks out her nails. “It’s just been missing for a bit.”

“It doesn’t exist,” Hudson says again.

But I’m not so sure—the Bloodletter doesn’t look like she’s bluffing. At all.

“Is that what Cyrus told you?” she asks him. “More like he couldn’t get his hands on it, so he doesn’t want anyone else to even know it exists.”

That sounds exactly like something Cyrus would do, and I can tell Hudson must think so, too, because he stops arguing. He’s not ready to ask her any questions about it, but he isn’t fighting anymore, either. Which is as close to surrender as he gets.

“What does the Crown do?” I ask, still very confused about the whole thing.

“The Crown is supposed to give whoever wears it infinite power,” Hudson says flatly.

“That’s it?” I ask. “Just more power?”

“There’s no *just* about it,” the Bloodletter tells me. “The power is unparalleled. Some even say that it grants its wearer the ability to rule the Seven Circles.”

“Wait. Circles? As in the council we’re supposed to be on now?” I gesture to Hudson.

“The council *you’re* supposed to be on,” he tells me.

“Yeah, with *my mate*.”

He looks away. And damn, just damn. Somehow this situation keeps

getting worse, and everything I say is the wrong thing.

"There are seven of them?" I ask.

"Of course, child. You didn't think there were only five paranormal creatures in the world, did you? You just happen to belong to this Circle."

I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that. She's barely gotten started, and I already feel like that emoji with its mind blowing up. "Who's in the other Circles?"

"Does it matter?" Hudson snarks.

The Bloodletter ignores him. "Fairies, mermaids, elves, succubi, just to name a few."

"Succubi," I repeat. "Elves. Just walking around the world, minding their own business."

"Elves mind everyone's business," Hudson says. "They're a nosy lot."

Not what I was expecting him to say, but okay. "And this Crown rules them all?"

"The Crown brings balance to the universe. For a long time, paranormals held too much power, so the Crown was created to balance that out. But where there is that kind of power, there is always avarice. The desire to wield power over everything and everyone."

She takes a slow drink of blood. "A thousand years ago, the person who tried to claim the Crown was Cyrus."

"Of course it was," Hudson mutters.

"It disappeared, along with the person who was wearing it, and Cyrus has been searching for it ever since. Find the Crown and maybe, just maybe, you'll find a way to break your mating bond and *unbreak* your bond with Jaxon."





I've Got to See  
a Man About  
a Beast

“Let me get this straight,” I tell her. “It’s been missing for a thousand years, with people all over the world—including the vampire king himself—hunting for it, and you think Hudson and I can find it?”

“I never said I thought you could find it. I said it’s possibly the only way to break the bond.” She walks to her chair and settles back into it. “Sorry, these old bones of mine get tired if I stand too long.”

I don’t believe that for a second, and a quick glance at Hudson tells me he doesn’t, either. But neither of us calls her on it, not when she’s in the middle of this story.

“But if you were to decide that you wanted to look for it, I would start with the one person who might know where it is. And since you’ve already met him, you could actually have a chance to get him to talk to you.”

“Who?” I ask, even as I rack my brain trying to figure out who she could be talking about. Even Hudson is leaning in, as invested in her answer as I am.

“You mean you don’t know?” She crooks a brow. “The Unkillable Beast, of course. Some say it’s why he was imprisoned to begin with...so no one would know where he hid the Crown.”

“The Unkillable Beast?” I repeat, heart beating faster. “I already told you, he speaks to me. You think I could just ask him, and he would give me the answer?”

“I think he’s too far gone to impart anything but the very basic things needed for survival. But you tell me. What do you think?”

I think back to his cave, to how he only talks to me in very short sentences. How he tried to give me his heart. “I don’t think he remembers.”

“Then you’ve only got one choice. You need to turn him human—he’s been in his gargoyle form so long, it’s likely driven him mad.”

“Wait a minute, is that possible?” I ask, because it feels like something

someone should have told me. Like, *stay a gargoyle too long and that could happen to you, too*. Yeah, it definitely feels like something I should know.

"Centuries, Grace." Hudson chimes in for the first time in a while. "You'd have to stay in your gargoyle form for centuries for it to happen to you."

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Because I've been researching gargoyles for weeks." He rolls his eyes at me. "Do you think I'd let you figure it out all by yourself if there's something out there that might hurt you?"

Of course not. Not Hudson, who is as crotchety as they come but who also would never, ever let someone he cares about face something awful alone.

I smile at him, and for a second I think he's going to smile in return. But he looks back to the Bloodletter at the last minute and demands, "So how exactly do we turn him human?"

Her green eyes sharpen on Hudson before she replies, "You free him. His chains keep him in his gargoyle form. Break those, and he'll become human again."

"We already tried to break them," I tell her. "We couldn't. Vampire, dragon, witch, gargoyle—" I gesture to myself. "None of us could do it."

"That's because they're enchanted."

"Enchanted?" Hudson throws his hands up in the air. "Are you fucking with us now? Sending us on some wild goose chase to get us out of your hair?"

"Hudson—" I lay a calming hand on his shoulder, but he shrugs it off.

"No! No way, Grace. She has all these bloody rules that just get more outlandish every second of the day. *You can't break the bond. Oh, yes you can, but you need the Crown. Oh, no one knows where the Crown is. Except, wait a minute, someone does. But you can't actually find out from him...* Come on. It's a bunch of shite and she knows it."

"Maybe it is," I whisper to him. "But maybe it isn't. Maybe we should try."

"Is it really that important to you?" he asks, and the anger is gone from his eyes—along with every other emotion.

I don't know how to answer that question, so I sidestep it for now. "We don't have to make a decision this minute. We can just hear what she has to say and then decide later."

He looks like he wants to argue some more, but in the end, he just sighs and waves a hand in a *whatever* gesture.

"How do we break the enchanted chains?" I ask, even though I'm feeling

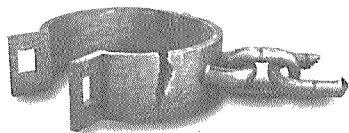
as overwhelmed as Hudson obviously is. Maybe even more.

The Bloodletter looks back and forth between us, like she's debating whether or not she's even going to tell us. But in the end, she heaves a little sigh and says, "All I know is that you need to find the Blacksmith, who made the chains. Actually," she adds with a small smile at Hudson, "he's the same Blacksmith who made that cuff you're wearing. Made a whole set of enchanted cuffs that were later gifted to Katmere. If you want to break the Unkillable Beast's chains, then you need to find him."

"And how exactly do we find the Blacksmith?" Hudson demands.

"Honestly?" She shakes her head. "I have absolutely no idea."

## Hello, Is it Brie You're Looking For?



We don't get much more out of the Bloodletter—either because she has nothing else to tell us or because she's holding out on us for God only knows what purpose. With her, you never can tell.

She offers to let us spend the night because it'll be super late before we get back to Katmere, but I'd rather face all the nocturnal wildlife Alaska has to offer than spend one more minute in her ice cave.

Thankfully, the trip back is uneventful. The storm that had been threatening seemed to head in the opposite direction instead. And the only wildlife we run into are a few wolves, but a snarl from Hudson sends them on their way pretty quickly. Besides, I can fly and they can't, and that makes everything better in my book.

At one point, we take a brief break, and I tell Hudson the Bloodletter froze him (which he was not a fan of, no surprise) and what the Bloodletter shared with me, about the coven and the mating bond and how Jaxon and I were drawn to each other. Hudson is silent through all of it, just gazing into the dark night as we quietly walk through the forest—which is better than I expected him to take it.

At least until the end, when he snarls, "Fucking bloodsucker," and that says it all. Especially since I know it's about a lot more than her being a vampire.

We take off again after that and head straight back.

I'm exhausted and starving by the time we make it to school and want nothing more than a hot shower, some food, and my bed. But at the same time, my mind is still racing with a million different thoughts. It's Saturday night, so I know Macy will be out with the witches, and I don't want to be alone. Not when I can't stop thinking about Jaxon and Hudson and Cyrus and the Unkillable Beast.

I think about the beast a lot as Hudson walks me down the hall to my room. I promised him I'd come back and free him and I want to—I need to. I just don't know if this Blacksmith guy, whoever he is, will actually know how to do it. Or if he'll even want to. If the Bloodletter is right, then he's the one who made the shackles to begin with, so why on earth would he want to help remove them?

And how evil does he have to be to have done such a thing in the first place?

I ask Hudson as much, but he just shakes his head. "I'll never figure out why people make the choices they make," he answers. "How they can be so indifferent to right and wrong, good and evil. Or how they can just go along with the evil when it benefits them, or because it's too hard to fight it."

I think of his father, of the things that Cyrus has done and all the people who still follow him. Then I think of everything Hudson did trying to stop his father—and the price he had to pay.

"There's no easy answer, is there?" I say with a sigh.

"I'm not sure there's an answer at all," he tells me.

We're standing awkwardly outside my door now, and I don't know what to do. I can tell Hudson doesn't, either, because his hands are in his pockets and his usually direct gaze is focused anywhere, everywhere, but on mine.

At least until my stomach growls. Loudly.

"Hungry?" he asks with a sudden grin.

"Hey, flying burns a lot of calories!" I make a face at him.

He nods toward my room. "Do you have something to eat in there?"

"Yeah, I'll grab a granola bar—"

"You've already had three granola bars today." He leans a shoulder against the wall next to my door. "Don't you think it's time to pump some actual nutrition into your body?"

"Yeah, well, the dining hall is closed, so what do you suggest?" I grimace. "And please don't say a thermos of blood."

At first, I don't think he's going to answer, but then he says, "I suggest that you go take a shower. You need it."

"Are you saying I smell?" I gasp in mock outrage.

"I'm saying you're shivering. A shower will warm you up." Then he grabs on to my hat and pulls it down hard and fast over my eyes.

"Hey!" It only takes a second for me to pull my hat back above my eyes,

but by the time I do, he's almost at the other end of the hallway.

"Hudson—" I call but then stop myself. Because I have no idea what I want to say to him.

He must understand, because he gives me a grin and a little two-finger wave before disappearing down the stairs as I head into my room.

Sure enough, Macy isn't around, though she has left two chocolate chip cookies on a plate by my bed. I think about just grabbing them and diving under my covers, but Hudson is right. I'm shivering. Plus my shoulders are aching—probably from flying hundreds upon hundreds of miles today in thirty-degree weather.

Using their wings for long periods of time never seems to bother Flint or Eden—the only two dragons I know well enough to ask—but it always makes me sore. Likely because my upper back muscles were never meant to support wings, let alone my entire weight, for as long as they do these days.

But surely that will change, right? Just like any other muscle—the more I use them, the more acclimated to it they'll become.

I take a quick shower, then grab a pair of pajamas and get dressed. Cookies, then an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—what can I say, playing peacemaker to Hudson and the Bloodletter for most of the day has put me in the mood—and then bed.

I *should* do some schoolwork. Heck, I *should* do anything but lay on my bed and think about how getting me to Katmere, to Jaxon, might have gotten my parents killed. Were we nothing more than pawns on a chessboard for the Bloodletter? Or was there someone else playing games with them? I really need to figure this out, need to know who my enemies are, but I'm just too tired tonight.

Besides, if I were going to wrestle with anything, it would be how hard my heart was hammering when I learned Jaxon was never meant to be my mate—Hudson was. I've tried to keep Hudson firmly in a box marked "friend" because it didn't seem fair to Jaxon to even consider him any other way. But now, it doesn't seem fair to Hudson to think of Jaxon as anything more than an ex-boyfriend. Well, until I remind myself how badly Hudson doesn't want to be mated to me in the first place. I swallow. Hard.

And this is why I prefer to keep my shit in a drawer, thank you very much. My heart is hammering in my chest, my stomach is one twist away from heaving, and it takes me a full five minutes to calm my breathing again.

Eventually, I make it into bed, but I've barely pulled the covers up with my laptop before there's a knock on my door. I'm tempted to ignore it, but before I can decide, Hudson calls, "Come on, Grace. I know you're in there."

"What's wrong—" I start as I pull open the door seconds later.

I break off when I realize he's carrying a cafeteria tray loaded with a grilled cheese, some sliced fruit, and a Dr Pepper. "Where did you get all this?" I ask as I step back to let him in.

He gives me a look like he can't believe I just asked that. "I made it. Obviously." He puts the tray down on my bed, then settles himself at the end of it...like he belongs there.

Then again, when he was in my head, that and the spot near the window were his two favorite places from which to harangue me, so he probably feels like he does.

"You know how to make a grilled cheese?" I ask as I sit down on the other side of the tray. "How? Why?"

"What?" He looks offended. "You think because I'm a vampire, I don't know how to make a sandwich?"

"Well...it does seem part of a skill set you have no need for."

For long seconds, he doesn't say anything, just kind of watches me out of eyes that are unfathomable. But eventually he answers, "I do have a half-human mate, you know. And she needs to eat human food. Besides," he continues with a shrug, "YouTube is a thing."

An awkward silence descends between us, and I honestly don't know what to say to him. There's so much to unpack there that I don't have a clue where I'm supposed to start—and I'm too exhausted to try.

So, in what I'm coming to realize is typical bury-my-head fashion, I focus on the least-triggering comment. "You YouTubed how to make a grilled cheese sandwich?"

He lifts a brow. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No. I just..." I trail off, not sure what I want to say.

"Just?" he prompts.

"Thank you." It's not quite what I mean—at least not completely—but for now, it will do. "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome." He leans toward me and for one bizarre second, I think he's going to kiss me. Every alarm bell I've got goes off inside me, and I tense up completely—though I'm not sure if it's from fear or desire.

I start to say something else, then kind of strangle—whether on the words or the breath that’s suddenly caught in my throat, I don’t know—as Hudson’s shoulder brushes against my arm.

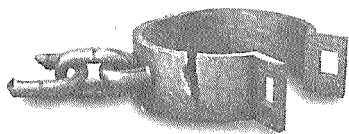
Oh. My. God. He’s really going to—

But then he sinks back down to his spot on the bed...my laptop now in his hands. “Want to watch something?”

I am beyond ridiculous.

He wasn’t trying to kiss me. He was reaching for the computer. Except... except the way he’s looking at me tells me there was more to it than that. As does the fast and hard beating of my heart.



Netflix and  
No Chill

“S”ure.” I don’t think I could sleep now anyway. Plus, I don’t know, it just feels like maybe Hudson doesn’t want to be alone, either.

“Any suggestions?” he asks, brows raised like he expected me to say something more than a quick affirmative.

I shrug. “I was about to turn on *Buffy*.”

“*Buffy*?” He sounds clueless.

“The vampire slayer?” I’m shocked. I know it’s an old show, but he’s way older. How could he not have heard of it?

“Charming,” he tells me with a roll of his eyes. “Mind if I veto that and pick something else?”

I wave a magnanimous hand at the screen. “Pick away.”

He scans through the different streaming services we’ve got, then settles on Disney Plus—which is *not* what I was expecting.

“Let me guess,” I tease. “*Monsters, Inc.*?”

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye. “Actually, I’m more of a *Beauty and the Beast* kind of guy.”

I try to think of something flippant to say—or anything to say, for that matter—but before I can, Hudson hits Play. But instead of the old Disney fairy tale, Star Wars writing starts scrolling up the screen.

“*The Empire Strikes Back*?” I ask, surprised.

He shrugs. “It’s a classic for a reason.” Then he nods at the tray I haven’t yet touched. “Eat. You need it.”

As if to underscore his words, my stomach growls again. So I do as he suggests and take a bite of the grilled cheese. Then ask, “Which YouTube video did you watch anyway? One from Gordon Ramsay or something?”

“We Brits need to stick together.” He eyes me warily. “Why? Is it not good?”

"It's amazing." I take another bite and nearly moan in pure joy. "This might be the best thing I've eaten since..." I break off as I realize what I was about to say. *Since my mother died.*

Hudson must get it, though, because he doesn't push me. Instead, he settles back against the wall and nods toward the laptop. "This is one of my favorite parts."

"The snow?" I ask, because it's been a really, really long time since I've seen this movie.

He gives me a dry look. "Yes, because snow is such a rare commodity in my life that I need to just bask in its glory on-screen."

"Wow." I make a face at him. "Who peed in your cup of blood?"

He just kind of stares at me for a while, then says, "I don't even know where to start figuring out what that means. And I'm pretty sure I don't want to know anyway."

"It's just a funny saying. About peeing in someone's cornflakes, but you don't eat cornflakes, so..." I sigh. "I'm just making it worse, aren't I?"

"Maybe a little bit, yeah." He shakes his head. "People are strange."

"Umm, excuse me, but so are vampires."

He gives me a mock-offended look. "Vampires are perfectly normal, thank you very much."

"Yeah, right. We did just come back from visiting a woman who had actual human beings draining into a *bucket*. And you're going to hassle *me* about some bizarre phrasing?"

"The draining thing is weird, right?" He shudders. "I much prefer to drink from—" He freezes, like he's suddenly realized what he's saying and who he's saying it to. Then he becomes very, very, *very* interested in what is happening on-screen.

But no way am I letting him off that easily, especially since it's really hard to even get a vampire to talk about what they eat...at least, it's always been for me. "So you like feeding from the...host?"

He looks at me like he's debating how much he wants to say, but in the end he shrugs and says, "You like it when your food's warm, right?"

"Oh, right. Of course." I don't even realize that I'm gently stroking the sensitive skin of my throat until I notice Hudson is staring at my fingers with a look in his eyes that has nothing to do with food and everything to do with a lot of things neither one of us is talking about. At all.

His look has me fidgeting, has me wondering, for just a second, what it would feel like to have his fangs scrape against my skin. Which basically gets me all flustered again and has me looking anywhere but at him as I try to banish the thought from my mind.

We watch the next few minutes of the movie in silence, but there's a tension in the air now that won't go away, and it's making me feel all kinds of shaken. Making me think of all kinds of things—including that Hudson and I are mates.

But also, that I used to be mated to Jaxon.

Just the thought has me squirming uncomfortably.

"What's wrong?" Hudson asks.

Since I'm in no way emotionally prepared to tell him that I just spent entirely too long thinking about his fangs on my skin, I admit to the other thing I haven't been able to get out of my mind, no matter how hard I try not to think about it.

"I can't believe my parents made a deal with the Bloodletter. Like, what did they say? 'Sure, absolutely, mate my unborn child to a vampire. As long as I get what I want, I'm in. No big deal.'" I give a little what-the-hell shrug. "How could that not have been a deal breaker? And then they didn't even bother to tell me about it. They just..."

I drift off, because the only way to finish that statement is with a comment about how they died before they ever told me...that is, if they were ever going to tell me.

"Are you angry?" Hudson asks softly.

"I don't know. I'm—" I sigh, then run a hand through my still-damp curls because it's all I can do at this point. "I'm just tired. Really, really tired. I mean, there's no point in being angry with them. They're dead, and nothing I feel now is going to change that fact, so..." I blow out a long breath. "I just really want to know what they were thinking. Why did they think it was okay to take away my choice like that?"

"That's the thing, though, right? They didn't actually take your choice." He grabs the laptop and pauses the movie before turning back to face me. "Or, at least, I'm pretty sure that's not how they thought about it."

"They chose my mate—"

"Yeah, but it wouldn't have worked if you weren't open to it. They could have done all the magic in the world, but if you didn't want Jaxon, it wouldn't

have mattered. You chose him, and that's why he became your mate. They were part of this world. They know how it works. Worst-case scenario—or best case, depending on your point of view—you meet Jaxon, fall for him, and then realize he's your mate when you choose him. If you hadn't chosen him, neither of you would ever have known. They probably thought it was a win-win situation.”

I think about what he said, turning his words over and around in my head until I decide he might be right. And if he isn't, I'm just going to pretend that he is because I really can't handle being angry with my parents now, not on top of everything else I'm feeling and going through at the moment. But as I play his words back in my head one more time, I can't help realizing something else. “Is that what happened with us?” I ask before I can think better of it. “Did you choose me?”

The second the words are out of my mouth, I kind of want to crawl under my bed. Instead, I stare straight ahead at the frozen screen as I wait, breath held, for his response—and to find out just how embarrassed I should be for asking him that question.

To make matters even worse, Hudson doesn't answer right away. He's not staring at the laptop, though. He's staring at me—I can feel the weight of his gaze even though I refuse to so much as glance at him.

The silence goes from unnoticeable to awkward to uncomfortable as fuck, and still he doesn't answer me. Still he continues to watch me. It's awful, terrible, and when I can't take it anymore, I turn my head and prepare to tell him to forget it.

Instead, the moment our eyes meet, he smiles just a little and says, “How could I not want to be mated to my best friend? I've known you were incredible from the first day we met.”

Oh my God. The relief that rushes through me is so huge that it almost makes me light-headed. Which, to some degree, seems totally ridiculous. But I don't care because I'm not humiliated. And also because...

Hudson chose me on that field. He chose me in that clearing. And that matters.

Maybe he doesn't love me, maybe he'll never love me—maybe I'll never love him. But I'd be lying if I said we didn't have *something* between us. I've felt it a bunch of times—from that one weird moment when he was still in my head, when I swore I felt his fangs scraping along my neck, to just a few

minutes ago, when he reached for the computer. He brought me flowers. He helped me figure out how to channel my magic. He stood up for me with the Bloodletter.

He's never once not believed in me.

Not to mention the obvious—he's seriously easy on the eyes.

Yeah, there's definitely something there. And this guy, this really great guy, has never had anyone love him before, has never had anyone choose *him*.

Don't I owe it to him—don't I owe it to us both—to at least try to make things work between us? Maybe they will, maybe they won't. But he matters to me. He matters to me a lot, and maybe I need to figure that out before I even think about doing anything else.

Maybe Jaxon was right, and I need to trust the magic.

I clear my throat, swallow, tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, fidget with the covers. Anything and everything to avoid making myself vulnerable. To avoid walking right into something else that's going to tear me to shreds.

So instead of just saying what's on my mind, I start a little more slowly, a little more carefully. "What if—" I blow out a breath and force the words from my too-tight throat. "What if we don't go after the Crown?"

Hudson's brows go way up. "You don't want the Crown?"

"I mean, I want to free the Unkillable Beast. I promised him we would, and we need to do that. But...maybe we don't need the Crown once we do it?"

For a second, it seems like Hudson has stopped breathing completely. His eyes are nearly black, his pupils blown out until I can see only a thin rim of blue around the edges. But then it's his turn to clear his throat as he asks, "Is that what you want to do?"

"I think so, yeah." I swallow. "Is it what *you* want to do?"

He grins just a little, and for the first time ever, I notice a tiny dimple in his left cheek. It makes him look more vulnerable, less armored, and I'd be lying if I said my heart didn't jump a bit in my chest at the idea that I'm seeing a side of him that no one else gets to.

Even before he says, "Oh yeah."

Then he leans forward, and it's definitely not for the laptop this time. His eyes are focused on mine, his lips open just a little as he slowly, slowly, slowly—

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest, I'm certain he can hear it. The first time Jaxon kissed me, I was dying for it. But right here, right now, the thought of Hudson's lips on mine is a lot. Maybe almost too much. "Umm,

can I ask a question?”

Hudson pauses, only inches from my mouth now, his soft gaze holding mine. “Anything.”

I swallow. So much trust in that one answer, it makes me want to lean forward the last bit and kiss him back. But a part of me knows that, with him, it’s going to be much more than just a kiss. More than just physical. Probably more than either of us is ready for. So I take a deep breath—and pump the brakes. “Can we, umm...can we take it slow?”

He blinks. “Slow?”

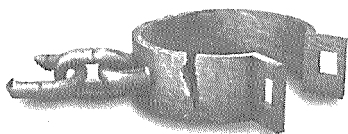
“Yeah, I’m...” I blow out a breath. “I don’t know what I am.” More, I don’t know what this is, except scary as fuck.

He smiles a little, strokes a finger down my cheek. Then whispers, “Sure, Grace.”

But as he starts to move back away from me, I can’t help but realize the mistake in my request. Because the only thing worse than a kiss I am not sure I’m emotionally ready to handle with Hudson is not kissing him at all. And just like that, I reach up and fist his shirt in my hands, tugging him toward me again.

Hudson growls, a predatory gleam replacing the softer look from before, and thrusts one of his hands in my curls, his other snaking around my back and yanking me against his hard chest. My hands slide up to tangle in his silky hair, and I think I’m going to die if he doesn’t—

Suddenly, a knock sounds on the door—loud, hard, urgent—and we break apart so fast that Hudson has to grab me again to keep me from tumbling off the side of the bed.



## And You Thought You Had Daddy Issues

Hudson glances at me in question, but I just shrug, so he gets up to answer the door. He hasn't taken more than a step before the door flies open, and I realize Jaxon is standing on the other side...along with the entire Order.

And none of them looks happy.

"Jaxon, what's wrong?" I ask, jumping off the bed.

Before I can reach him, he turns toward his brother. "We have a problem," he tells Hudson.

Hudson is watching him warily, and I don't blame him. The warmth I usually see in Jaxon's eyes is gone, and in its place is a distance I'm not used to. Not to mention a chill that has me looking for a sweater.

Which isn't exactly a good feeling—especially when I give them permission to enter and my little dorm room is stuffed to the gills with seven vampires. And not just any vampires. Seven very large, very disgruntled vampires, all of whom look like they're ready to draw blood at the slightest provocation.

"What's going on?" Hudson responds, even as it looks like he's bracing for a body blow—whether from the news or from Jaxon himself, I'm not sure.

"We just got back from Court," Mekhi tells him.

"And?" Hudson draws out the word.

All eyes turn to Jaxon, but he doesn't say anything else. Just walks to the window and stares out into the night.

I exchange a baffled glance with Mekhi, who looks like he wants to say something to Jaxon but then changes his mind at the last minute. Instead, he focuses on Hudson and says, "Cyrus convened a secret Circle meeting and has issued an order for your immediate arrest, presumably for the crimes committed against those students you persuaded to kill each other. And while he can't arrest you at Katmere, the second you step off campus, you're

fair game for the Watch to take you.”

“The Watch?” I interrupt as horror sweeps through me. We spent the whole day off campus. If someone had found us, would they have taken Hudson? Or at least tried to, as I can’t imagine him going quietly? “Who are they?”

“No one,” Hudson says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“They’re not no one.” Jaxon’s voice is colder than the Bloodletter’s cave. “They’re a sort of paranormal police force governed by the Circle that rose up in the absence of gargoyles to deliver justice by capturing those accused of crimes and delivering them to prison.”

Well, that sounds absolutely awful. But, “Wait. Why straight to prison? There’s no trial or anything?” I ask.

Again, the seven vamps exchange looks that very definitely leave me out. I’m about to call them on it when Hudson answers, “The Aethereum’s not a normal prison.”

Of course it isn’t. When has anything in this world been anything as mundane as *normal*? I wait for him to elaborate, but when he doesn’t, I turn to Jaxon and cut straight to the chase. “What makes this prison special?”

But he looks as reluctant to answer me as Hudson does, despite the coldness that continues to radiate from him.

“Mekhi?” I skewer him with a look that tells him he’d better start talking.

And while he might have laughed at such a look a few months ago, this time he jumps in right away. “The prison is cursed, Grace. There are nine levels of...hell...in an effort to prove innocence or redemption. They say the prison knows your sin and will let you go when you’ve been fully *rehabilitated*. But almost no one ever gets free. Like, ever.”

“How—how are prisoners deemed...rehabilitated?” I can barely get the words out of my too-tight throat.

“It tortures you. In every way you can possibly imagine, befitting your sins. An eye for an eye and all that. Most people go insane if they stay long enough. It’s considered a fate worse than death. Only the worst criminals are sent there.”

Torture. Insanity. Fantastic. I blow out a long breath as the terrible truth slams through me. “And this is what his own father wants to do to Hudson?” The only thing surprising about that question is that I’m surprised I even had to ask. “But why wasn’t I allowed a vote, if the Circle is who issued his



arrest warrant? Why can Cyrus get away with this?"

"Because he's the vampire king," Luca says. "He's untouchable."

"Yeah, well, I'm the gargoyle queen, in case anyone's forgotten!" My voice snaps like a rubber band, and the already quiet room turns eerily silent.

They're all looking at me with varying degrees of surprise or respect, but I don't care what any of them thinks of me. Not when Hudson's life—and sanity—is on the line.

I shake my head and turn to hold Hudson's gaze, trying to figure out what he's thinking and feeling, but his face is stoic. "Surely as king and queen of the Gargoyle Court, we get a vote in what's going to happen, right?"

Jaxon very quietly answers, "You're not queen yet."

I turn startled eyes toward him. "What—"

"You're not technically the queen until the coronation. Which means Hudson, as your mate, isn't gargoyle king yet, either. He's fair game." His jaw works. "You both are."

"Me? I didn't do anything to Cyrus." Well, besides beat his ridiculous challenge.

"That's why the arrest warrant isn't for you," Mekhi says. "But Cyrus isn't naive, and he knows that it's usually too difficult for mates to be separated for any length of time. Which means...he's expecting you to choose to stay with Hudson and go to prison for his crimes, too."

My gaze seeks out Hudson's again, and I don't have to be a mind reader to know what he's thinking this time—no way would he ever allow me to pay for his crimes.

"So if we're imprisoned before coronation—no more gargoyle queen and king," I say. "And no shift of power on the Circle."

"Exactly," Hudson agrees.

Terror reverberates through me—partly because I don't want Hudson or me to go to prison or die (obviously) and partly because it's becoming clearer and clearer that we're not in control of anything. None of us is. Instead, Cyrus holds all the power here.

"So we need to think of something. You're safe for a few more weeks, until graduation, but after that, it's open season," Mekhi says. "There has to be a way to stop this before then."

"Of course there is," Hudson tells him with a sarcastic twist of his lips. "I'll do what I should have done on that field and end Cyrus once and for all."

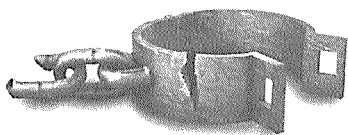
"And spend the rest of your life in prison for his murder?" I demand, my hands on my hips. "You can't do that."

He doesn't answer, and that's when my fear ratchets straight up to full-blown terror. Because the look in his eyes says it all. One way or another, Hudson is going to put an end to his father's ability to threaten us...to threaten *me*...or die trying.

Just the thought of losing him makes my hands shake and my heart beat way too fast. There has to be another way. There has to be. We can't just—

And that's when it hits me.

"What about the Crown?" I whisper.



“The Crown?” Mekhi looks confused. “You won’t get that until the coronation after graduation—”

“No, not the one I get for being gargoyle queen. The one the Bloodletter told us about today. It’s been missing, but it can—” I break off when Rafael starts laughing.

“You think you can find *the* Crown?” he asks when he finally stops laughing. “Some of the most powerful creatures in existence have searched for that Crown for centuries, and you think we can just conjure it up?” He laughs again, even as he shakes his head. “It might have been true once, but at this point, it’s just an old vampires’ tale.”

“It’s not,” Hudson tells him flatly. “The Crown is real.”

“Because the Bloodletter told you so?” Rafael challenges him.

“Because I’ve spent the last two centuries listening to Cyrus obsess about it. My father is a lot of things, but he is no sucker. If it didn’t exist—if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes—he wouldn’t have cared so much about uncovering it.”

“And you think you can find it?” Liam interjects. “As you say, the vampire king himself has been searching for it for centuries, and you think you’re just going to walk right up to it?”

“I didn’t say *that*,” I tell him, smarting a little from being made fun of. “I know it won’t be easy. But none of this is easy, and the Bloodletter pointed us in the right direction—”

“She told you where it is?” Jaxon asks, and forget cold. Now his voice is absolutely frigid, the look on his face as blank as any I’ve ever seen from him. “Why would she do that?”

I glance at Hudson before I can stop myself, and he subtly shakes his head at me. I understand where he’s coming from—I’m not exactly up for

airing all our baggage in front of the entire Order, either—but when I turn back to Jaxon, it's obvious he's seen the entire interaction. And he's not happy.

Still, he must not be all that excited about showing off our differences in front of everyone, either, because he doesn't call us on it. Instead, he glosses over his first question and moves on to, "So what did she tell you? Where's the Crown?"

"She doesn't know," I answer after a second. "But she told us who she thinks does. The Unkillable Beast."

"The Unkillable Beast?" Mekhi asks incredulously. He looks like he thinks it over for a second before shaking his head. "You don't think that sounds a little questionable? She *did* just send you there a few weeks ago to kill it. Why didn't she mention it before you went?"

"She didn't need to mention it then—" I start to explain.

"And she needed to mention it now?" He sounds so skeptical, and when he says it like that, I don't blame him. Like, yeah, last time we talked to her, none of us had any idea I'd end up mated to Hudson and want to break that bond. But still. It's a good point. Especially when I consider Hudson's mistrust of her.

It's hard to trust anyone who doles information out on a when-she-wants-to-tell-you basis.

"Why does the Bloodletter do anything?" Hudson snaps at him, and this time he's definitely showing some fang. "I don't think anyone is going to dispute that she has her own agenda, whether we know what that agenda is or not. Besides, the Crown isn't a faction artifact. It couldn't do anything for us last time, as it wouldn't have worked in the spell Grace performed. And I think we can all agree, there was never a chance we would actually kill the beast before, so she likely felt nothing risked." He shrugs.

"And you think the Crown can do something for us now? Really?" Luca sounds as skeptical as Mekhi.

"I don't know." I throw my hands up in defeat. "It was a bad idea. I panicked at the thought of Hudson getting arrested and—"

"Don't do that," Hudson growls, and for the first time since Jaxon and the Order got here, he steps forward to put himself just a little bit in front of me. "You don't need to make excuses to him," he continues with a searing look at the other vampires in the room.

I start to inch up, just in case I have to put myself between two aggressive

vampires, but Jaxon moves forward at the same time. And Liam falls back immediately.

“Why the Unkillable Beast?” he asks, gaze once again moving between Hudson and me. “Why does she think he knows where the Crown is? And even if he once did, does she know what kind of shape he’s in now? I know you can hear him in your head, Grace, but do you really think he’s capable of having a full conversation with you, let alone able to tell you where the Crown is hidden?”

It’s a good point, one I’ve thought about a lot since the Bloodletter warned us we’d have to find the Blacksmith first. “Once we break his shackles, he’ll get better,” I tell Jaxon. “She says it’s the enchanted chains that have made him like this. They were never meant to be worn this long.”

“We already tried to break those chains,” he reminds me. “It didn’t work.”

“That’s why we’re supposed to find someone called the Blacksmith. He’s the one who made the chains.”

“And where is he?” Jaxon asks, both brows lifted.

“We start with the giants,” Hudson replies.

“The giants?” I ask, totally surprised by his suggestion. If I’ve learned anything over the past few weeks, it’s that Hudson always has a reason for what he says and does, but I have no idea what that reason might be here.

The Bloodletter never mentioned giants at all—and neither has he—which makes me wonder where he’s coming from now. Though I have to admit the idea of getting to see where they live is both exhilarating and daunting. Like, are we talking huge beanstalks? And if so, how exactly do they hide them from passing airplanes and NASA satellites?

“They’re known for their metalwork,” Luca explains quietly. “And it’s actually a pretty good idea to start with them.” He sounds surprised.

I expect Hudson to be annoyed, but he just rolls his eyes and snarks, “Damned by faint praise.”

Apparently, Jaxon isn’t the only one who likes to misquote *Hamlet*...

“Is there a particular place to find great metalworking giants?” I ask, my gaze moving from vampire to vampire. But no one seems to want to answer me, so I huff. “Or should I just look for a giant beanstalk somewhere?”

Luca snickers, but Hudson looks clueless. “I’m not sure giants grow beans there but—”

“I don’t mean actual beanstalks.” I make a face at him. “I mean like *Jack*

*and the Beanstalk.* You know. With the magic beans.”

He still looks clueless.

“The beans grow into a huge beanstalk that goes all the way to the sky? And this boy climbs it, only to find a giant at the top?” He’s still shaking his head like he has no idea what I’m talking about, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little shocked. He’s literally read just about everything, but he’s somehow missed out on the most basic fairy tales? How is that possible?

“Never mind,” I tell him with a shake of my head. “It’s not important.”

He looks like he wants to say more, but Jaxon says, “Let me get this straight.” He looks between Hudson and me. “You want us to chase after a maybe mythical, maybe not *giant* in a *city* of giants in hopes of finding out how to break the chains on the Unkillable Beast in the hopes that *he* might know how to find this all-powerful Crown?”

Not going to lie, it sounds a little absurd when he puts it like that. “I don’t know that that’s what I want,” I tell him after a second. “I do know that I *don’t* want to be in a full-out war with your father—”

“Too late for that,” Hudson interrupts with a snort.

“Then how about I don’t want to watch you go to prison because your dad’s an asshole? And I definitely don’t want to go, either.” I throw my arms up as I look around the room. “If someone has a better idea, please let me know. Because I’ve got a shit ton of work to do between now and graduation, and the last thing I want is to spend time chasing giants when I don’t need to.”

I wait for Jaxon to chime in, for Hudson or Mekhi or Luca to tell me there are a *million* better ideas. But it doesn’t take very long for me to figure out—complaints or not, sarcasm or not—none of them has a better idea. At least not one that has a chance of stopping Hudson, and maybe me, from being arrested...or worse.

“Okay, then,” I say after the silence has gone on way too long. “Where do we start?”

As far as I’m concerned, the sooner we find the Blacksmith, the sooner I can get Cyrus off his sons’ asses—and my ass—for good.

But once again, no one answers.

“Seriously?” I ask. “You’re not even going to try to help me come up with a plan?” Forget the others, I look between Hudson and Jaxon. Surely they’ll help me.

“It’s not that we don’t want to help,” Mekhi says in a soothing tone. “It’s

just that, to go against Cyrus, we should have more than a maybe-a-giant-can-help-us plan. What if we get to Giant City and no one will help us—but someone else is more than happy to tell Cyrus what we're doing?"

"Well, we'll just have to take that chance, right?" When no one agrees—not even Hudson—I don't bother to hide my annoyance. "Well, *I'm* going to try. The rest of you can do whatever you want...but you need to do it somewhere other than my room."

"Because we don't agree with you?" Mekhi challenges.

"Because I'm exhausted. I flew to the Bloodletter's and back today, and all I want is to get some sleep." I move to the door and open it. "Thanks for the warning. I'm all in about figuring out how to stop Cyrus from ruining Hudson's and my lives forever. But..." I blow out a long breath. "Tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to eat my cold grilled cheese, drink my Dr Pepper, and go to sleep."

For a moment, nobody moves. But then Jaxon lifts his chin in a little nod toward the door, and the rest of the Order files out.

Jaxon starts to follow them, but at the last second, he turns and gives me a warning look. "Pinning all your hopes on finding the Crown isn't going to end well for any of us. We need a better plan."

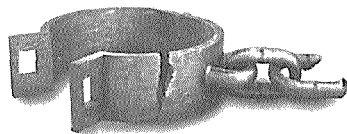
"I don't disagree," I tell him. "And as soon as you come up with something, you know where to find me. Until then, good night." I look at Hudson and nod toward the door myself. "To both of you."

Hudson doesn't say anything, but it's obvious he's as unhappy as Jaxon is as I close the door behind them. Which is just too bad, because right now... right now I need to have a full-blown panic attack, and the last thing I need is for Hudson to see it.

Because as sure as I know anything, I know Hudson will do something completely reckless—and most likely get himself killed if not locked in a prison meant to torture him for his immortal life—if it means protecting me.

I just hope I bought enough time to keep him safe until dawn.

## Like a Monster to a Flame



“So how much do you actually know about the Crown?” I ask Hudson the next afternoon as we work on finishing up our extra ethics project in the library.

He looks wary as he glances up from where he’s reading *Symposium*—in Ancient Greek. The show-off. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you didn’t seem to know anything about the Crown when the Bloodletter brought it up yesterday afternoon. But when we were discussing it with the Order last night, you acted like you knew everything.”

“I don’t know any more about it than anyone else,” he answers before ducking his head and going back to reading.

“I don’t believe that,” I tell him. “You said your father is obsessed with it.”

This time, he doesn’t even bother looking up from his book when he says, “My father *is* obsessed with it. But, in case you haven’t noticed, Cyrus and I aren’t what most people would consider close.”

I wait for him to say more, but of course he doesn’t. This is Hudson, after all, and curt is his middle name when he’s in a full-blown snit—which he currently is, though I don’t know why.

“Are we seriously going to do this all day?” I ask, blowing out a frustrated breath.

He raises a brow. “Do what?”

“This.” I gesture expansively between us. “Trying to talk to you when you’re like this is like pulling fangs.”

“Actually, removing their fangs kills vampires, so I’m guessing the struggle would be a lot more violent than this.” He turns the page emphatically.

I’m not so sure, considering I’m going to lose my shit if he turns another page like that. Still, “I’ve never heard that before, about fangs.”

“Shocking.”



My eyebrows lift. “I thought a stake through the heart is what killed vampires, not—”

“Who *doesn't* that kill?” He rolls his eyes. “And of course you’ve never heard about our fangs before. Do you think we go around broadcasting our vulnerabilities to humans so they can stomp all over us?”

“Yeah, but...” I trail off as I realize I don’t actually have anything to say to that. And Hudson has gone back to his reading anyway. Big surprise.

I look down at my own book—Aristotle’s *On the Soul* (definitely not in the original Greek)—and try to focus on my part of the project. The sooner I get this read, the sooner I can answer the Aristotle portion of the ethics question. And the sooner I can get away from a very pissy Hudson.

Except I can’t concentrate when he’s sitting over there stewing silently. He might be able to comprehend what he’s reading when he’s annoyed, but I might as well be reading in Greek. Which means this project is never going to get finished if we don’t find a way to clear the air between us.

Which is the only reason I finally ask, “Hey, what’s wrong?” Or at least, that’s what I tell myself.

Right up until he answers, “Nothing,” anyway.

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I tell him. “You’re ignoring me, and I don’t know why.”

“We are sitting at a table in the library, working *together* on a project, and I have answered every single thing you’ve said to me,” he says in a voice so primly British that it only stokes the flames of anger deeper inside me. “How, *exactly*, is that ignoring you?”

“I don’t know, but it is. And I don’t like it.”

And yes, I am perfectly aware of how ridiculous I sound, but I don’t actually care. I know when I’m being given the non-silent silent treatment, and that is definitely what’s happening here. Which is unfair, considering all I wanted last night was to not freak him out while I had a complete meltdown.

“Yes, well, it’s rough out there for a gargoyle.” He flips the page just a little too emphatically, and that, combined with the way he bastardizes the title of that old song to make fun of me, makes me snap.

I lean forward and, without giving myself a chance to change my mind, I shove his book right off the table.

I expect him to get mad, maybe demand what the hell I think I’m doing. Instead, he just looks from me to the book and back again. And says, “Not

a fan of Plato?"

I grit my teeth. "Not at the moment, no."

"Looks like you and Jaxon have more in common than I thought," he answers as he bends down to pick up the book. And then goes back to reading it.

"You know what? I'm not going to do this with you," I tell him, grabbing my stuff and shoving it into my backpack without so much as looking at what I'm doing. I hear paper rip, but I'm so mad that I don't even care.

"Now, there's a surprise," he answers, and this time when he flips a page, he does it with such force that I'm pretty sure he rips something, too. Not that I'm sticking around to figure out what. I'll go to my room and finish my half of the project, and then he's on his own.

"And you accuse *me* of being the one who doesn't deal with conflict," I say and then turn and leave.

I fume all the way up the stairs and all the way down the hallway. I have stuff to do today—a lot of stuff—and I don't have time for Hudson being petty. Sure, snarky is his default state, but not like this. Not to me.

I just wish I knew what set it off. Maybe then I could figure out how to fix it. But the longer we were at the library, the more annoyed he got, and I have no idea why. Any more than I know why he told me about the fangs thing, when he's so obviously mad at me.

I'm still trying to figure it out when I turn the last corner before I get to my room...and find him leaning against the wall near my door. Ugh. Vampires.

"I'm sorry I was an arse," he tells me in his perfect British accent.

"Don't you mean wanker?" I tell him as I open my door.

He moves his head in a back-and-forth, maybe kind of motion. "Seems a bit harsh if you ask me, but sure. If it makes you feel better. I was a tosser."

"A wanker," I repeat as I cross the threshold into my room. And can't help grinning as he tries to follow me in and gets stuck on the other side.

"Seriously?" he asks.

"You're not invited in. So not sorry." I move to close the door, but his hand flashes out and hits the door, stopping it from moving.

Which is surprising enough—I've always been under the impression that no part of a vampire could enter a room they're not permitted into, but that's obviously not true.

The fact that he's gotten the better of me makes me even more annoyed,

and I shove against the door even though I know I'm not going to be able to budge him.

Except he does retreat a little, even as he makes an odd hissing sound in the back of his throat. "Stop," he says hoarsely.

"What's wr—" I break off as I glance at his hand and realize that welts are burning through his skin and flesh.

For one second, panic holds me immobile, and then I realize what's happening. "Come in," I tell him in a voice several notes higher than my regular tone. "Come in, come in, come in."

The burning must stop instantly, because he breathes a sigh of relief as he lets the door go and steps over the threshold.

"What's wrong with you?" I demand, even as I grab him by the forearm so I can get a better look at his hand and wrist—both of which look like he just thrust them into a raging fire. "Why would you do that?"

"I wanted to apologize."

"By setting yourself on fire?" I gasp, dragging him over to my bed. "Let me at least bandage you up."

"It's nothing," he tells me. "Don't worry about it."

"It's obviously something," I shoot back, because even though the burns have healed somewhat—the subcutaneous tissue is no longer exposed—they still look like they're at least second-degree. "It won't take long. I have a first aid kit in my backpack."

He smiles softly. "I know."

"How do you know?" I ask, but then I realize. "Another thing from when we were trapped together?"

"'Trapped' is such a harsh word," he answers, and his little smile has become more of a wicked grin. One that makes my stomach do a flip or two... hundred, not that I'm counting.

"Yeah, well, I'm feeling pretty harsh right now," I mutter, even though it's not quite the truth. And also, not quite *not* the truth, either. "I can't believe you did this to yourself."

He doesn't say anything else and neither do I as I put some antibiotic salve—I don't know if it works on vampires, but I figure it can't hurt—over what remains of the burns. And then, because I can't stand the idea of Hudson in pain because of me, I close my eyes and focus on sending healing energy into his burns, one by one. I'm careful to monitor my breathing so he doesn't

realize that healing is in any way draining my energy, and it's really not. At least not much.

I'm on the last one when he clears his throat and says, "I didn't like getting kicked out of your room last night. I thought we'd just decided to try to make this work, almost even"—he looks away for a second, and I blush—"you know. And then you just tossed me out like one of the guys."

It's the last thing I expect him to say, and I fumble the antibiotic cream as I go to put it back in my kit. "I ..." I trail off as I realize I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to say to that.

"I know, it's silly. Obviously you have every right to kick me out anytime you want. I just got used to..." It's his turn to trail off.

"Being in my head all the time?" I ask him with a raised brow. Because I get it. I do.

I thought I'd be thrilled to be separated from Hudson and, for the most part, I am. But there are times when I go to share something with him, only to remember he's not there.

There are times I wish he *was* there, times it almost feels lonely without him.

And that was only after a couple of weeks—that I remember. How much harder must it be for him when he remembers us being together for four months? I can't even imagine.

"Maybe I miss it a little," he finally agrees. His reluctance only makes me feel worse, as does the way he refuses to look me in the eye.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as I glide my fingers along his smooth and healed skin. "I wasn't really kicking *you* out. I just couldn't handle being surrounded by all that vampire testosterone mansplaining to me for much longer. It was a lot."

"You make a fair point." His wicked little grin is back, which makes me smile, too.

"If it makes you feel better, the grilled cheese was delicious."

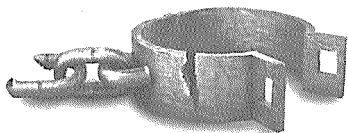
"Really?" He looks skeptical but also, maybe, just a bit hopeful.

"Absolutely." I smile. "So, so good."

His shoulders seem to relax. "I'm glad. I'll make you another one sometime."

I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to say to that, so I just smile and nod. This mate thing—even if we're just friends—is surprisingly hard work. But, also, not.

## Charmed, I'm Shore



“**H**ave a good day, Grace.”

The voice of my art teacher, Dr. MacCleary, startles me out of the stupor I've been in all day, and I glance around only to realize that I'm the last person in the room. Everyone else has already packed up and left.

“Sorry.” I shoot her an apologetic smile, then gather my things as quickly as I can. At least I have lunch next, so I don't have to worry about being late anywhere.

Because I do have an hour before my next class, I decide to skip the tunnels and take the long way back to the castle. It's a beautiful day, and I want to spend a few minutes in the sun if I can.

A frigid wind slaps me in the face the second I step outside the cottage, but I ignore it. This is Alaska, after all, and it's still cold out. But it's an okay kind of cold, the hoodie and scarf kind rather than the kind where I need a full abominable snowman outfit.

A storm is supposed to blow in tomorrow, though, so I might as well take advantage of the weather while I can. Instead of heading straight back to the castle, I wind my way around the art cottages to the path that takes me by the lake.

It's been frozen ever since I got here, but as I head down the path, I realize that the ice has finally melted. The lake is actually a lake again.

I stop for a minute and take a quick selfie or two with the water and the bright-blue sky in the background. Then I fire them off to Heather, along with the caption: Beach weather, Alaska style.

It only takes a few seconds before she texts back with a picture of herself in shorts and a T-shirt on the boardwalk at Mission Beach.

**Heather:** Beach weather, beach style

I shoot her back the eye roll emoji.

**Heather:** Bitter much?

She follows it with the laughing/crying emoji.

**Me:** So, so, soooooooo bitter

She sends me another pic, this one of her standing in line for the old wooden roller coaster we used to ride every time we went to Malibu Beach.

**Heather:** Wish you were here

**Me:** Me too

**Heather:** I'll be there soon enough

And fuck. I totally forgot about her coming to visit for graduation.

Angry tears burn in my eyes, because this is one more thing Cyrus has ruined for me. Heather had originally planned to come for Spring Break, but I'd pushed her off until graduation. But now I can't let Heather come then either—not when Cyrus and Delilah are going to be on campus. And not when I know they're gunning for me.

Cyrus would have no compunction about using a human girl to hurt me, and I can't stand the idea of something happening to Heather. My parents already died because of me—if Cyrus does something to Heather, I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself.

So, despite the fact that it kills me, I fire off a quick text that I know is going to piss her off.

**Me:** You can't come to graduation

**Heather:** Why not?

**Me:** We're not allowed visitors

It's a terrible excuse, but I don't know what else to say. Telling her I've got a homicidal vampire on my ass sounds like a very bad idea.

**Heather:** If you don't want me to come, all you have to do is say so

**Heather:** You don't have to lie

**Me:** I'm sorry. It's not a good time.

I wait for her to text back, but she doesn't, and I know it means she's pissed. Which she absolutely has a right to be, even though I'm just trying to save her life. I think about texting some more, but right now there really is nothing else to say. So I shove my phone back into the pocket of my hoodie and start the long trek to the castle. But I've only taken a few steps before I see a flash of black and purple in the gazebo across the lake.

I almost ignore it—it could be any one of the students at Katmere, after all—but when the hair stands up on the back of my neck, I change my mind

and take a closer look. Only to find Jaxon staring straight at me from his perch on the gazebo railing.

I haven't talked to him since I kicked him out of my room Saturday night, but that doesn't mean I don't want to. So I smile and raise a hand in a wave as I wait to see whether he's going to ignore me or wave back.

In the end, he does neither. Instead, he hops off the railing.

But seconds later, he's made it all the way around the lake.

"Hey, you," I say as he comes to a stop inches away from me.

"Hi." He doesn't smile, but I'm getting used to that, even though I wish I wasn't.

Impulsively, I lean in for a hug—mainly because it feels awkward not to but also because I just really want to. This is Jaxon, after all, and though the look in his eyes gives me a chill, I'm not about to push him away. Not when he's made the effort to come to me.

I get the impression that he puts up with the hug for as long as he can—about ten seconds, really—before he pulls away. "What are you doing out here?" he asks.

"Enjoying the weather before I have to get to my next class." I look him over as we start to walk, startled that he looks skinnier than he did just a couple of days ago. "What about you?"

He shakes his head, gives a little shrug. And keeps walking so fast that I have to scramble to catch up.

I don't like the awkward silence between us, so I cast around for something to say. I settle on, "Did you have a good—" then break off, because I already know how his weekend went. He spent most of it at Court with his parents, so probably not all that well.

Without an ending to the sentence, though, the first half is just hanging there, waiting for me to finish it or for him to smooth it over.

But he hasn't smoothed things over in weeks, not since our mating bond broke, and I'm suddenly so nervous that I can't think of anything else to say. Not one single thing to say to this boy who was once my mate.

I hate it so much.

What's happened to us? Where have all the conversations about nothing and everything gone? Where have all the feelings gone?

They couldn't have just disappeared, right? Couldn't have existed only because of the mating bond. Some of them had to be real—for both of us.

I know mine were real. If they weren't, my heart wouldn't feel like it was breaking wide open at everything we've lost. I told Hudson I wanted to give our mating bond a chance, and I meant it. But that doesn't mean I can't mourn my relationship with Jaxon. Can't wish we could at least be friends now.

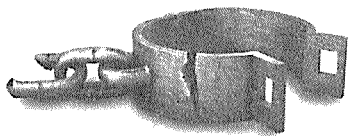
*What happened to us?* I think again, then freeze as I realize that this time, I've spoken out loud.

Jaxon's face closes up—a feat I didn't think was possible, considering what he's looked like since I saw him across the lake—and for a minute, I'm convinced that not only is he not going to answer, but that he's about to walk away as well.

Not that I blame him. We're going to great pains to pretend that everything is at least a little bit normal, so it really sucks that I just blew all that right out of the water.

But he doesn't walk away, and he doesn't ignore what I said. Instead, he looks down at me with those dark eyes of his, eyes that are anything but cold and removed, and answers, “Too fucking much.”





## Promises Made, Promises Broken

I hate to admit it, but he's not wrong. Too much has happened for things to feel normal between us now—or maybe ever again. It sucks, yeah, but there's a relief in hearing him admit it, a relief in having the words, and the sentiment, out in the open...no matter what happens next.

"What are we going to do?" I ask as we start walking again.

"The same thing as always," Jaxon answers. "Whatever we have to do to survive."

"Yeah, well, I'm not sure it's worth it." My mind whirls, trying to think of a non-"us" topic to discuss. Something bland. Something two exes who are friends would discuss. I settle on, "Well, with as much history class as I have to catch up on, surviving doesn't sound so easy."

Then I wait, breath held, to see if Jaxon will meet me halfway. To see if there's at least a chance that we can be friends.

He doesn't answer right away, and for a while the only sound is that of our boots crunching along the path. The silence stretches so long that eventually I have to let out my held breath, and as I do, my shoulders sag with the grief of it all. Of what we were and what we have become.

But then Jaxon glances at me out of the corner of his eye and asks, "Still having trouble?"

"I know. Believe me, I know how ridiculous it sounds to be drowning in a *history* class of all things. I just need to read and memorize, right? No big deal. But honestly, it's so much harder than that. There are all these case studies we're supposed to go over and then weigh in on, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to think about them, let alone what I'm supposed to write."

"I imagine it's hard coming into thousands of years of history for the first time," he adds.

"Right?" I throw up my hands in frustration. "I know the basic historical

event—like the Salem Witch Trials—but the new version of events they're teaching me is so different from anything I've ever imagined that it's hard to get my mind around it."

Jaxon makes a sympathetic noise. "That sounds like a lot."

"It is a lot. Finding out that what I consider historical facts are really just one side's opinion..." I use my hand to show my mind blowing up. "It's worse than my Physics of Flight class, and that one is pretty much an unmitigated disaster."

"You know, Grace." Jaxon gives me the side eye. "You really don't have to hold things in so much. You should tell me how you really feel."

"Wow, someone's extra sarcastic this morning." I stick my tongue out at him. "Bite me."

"Don't mind if I do." He leans forward, fangs at the ready, and I laugh. Push him away.

Still, for a second, all the awfulness clears, and it's like it used to be.

Jaxon must feel the same way, because he asks, "What flavor of ice cream do vampires like best?"

It's my turn to side eye him. "Blood sherbet?"

He laughs. "Good guess, but no." He pauses, then says, "Vein-illa."

It's so bad—*so* bad—but for a moment it's like having the old Jaxon back, and he looks so proud of himself that I can't help cracking up. "That's awful. Like really, really awful. You know that, right?"

"It made you laugh."

"Apparently, I like awful."

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I've noticed that about you lately."

It's a swipe at Hudson, and normally I'd call him on it. But things are going so well that I just roll my eyes back at him and keep walking.

"You know, if you need help with your history class, I'm here," Jaxon says after we've walked about a quarter of a mile in silence. "Paranormal history is kind of a must-know for a prince."

"Oh, right. I bet." I start to think I should turn him down—I don't want to rock the boat. But the truth is, the end of the semester is closing in on me, and I'm freaking out. "That would be awesome. Thank you. A lot."

Jaxon looks a little uncomfortable—whether that he offered to help me or the enthusiasm with which I accepted it—but I'm too desperate to let him off the hook now.

Instead, I say, "When can we start?"

He shrugs. "Whenever you want."

"I'm free this afternoon if you are."

"I'm not," he tells me with a shake of his head, "but I can be. Let me clear things off, and I'll text you."

Now I feel bad. "You don't have to do that. I can wa—"

He cuts me off with a look. "You don't get to tell me what I can and can't do anymore."

"Yeah, right." I snort. "Because that's how things ever went with us."

He grins but doesn't say anything else until we come to the path that will take us to the castle door. "How is everything going?" he asks. "With you and Hudson, I mean."

It feels like a loaded question, one that will destroy the fragile peace that's sprung up between Jaxon and me. At the same time, he has the right to know—more so than anyone else in the school, save the two of us.

I sigh. "It's complicated."

"He's a complicated guy." Jaxon crooks a brow. "But I was talking about the whole arrest thing. Have you guys come up with a plan?"

"Beyond finding the Blacksmith, you mean?" I shake my head. "We've got nothing."

He nods, swallows. Then very quietly asks, "Do you need some help?"

"Finding the Crown?" I swing around so I can get a good look at his expression. "I thought you didn't like that idea."

"I don't." His mouth twists, making his scar stand out in stark definition. "But I like the idea of you and my brother going to prison less, so I guess we do what we can do."

"Even if it's a dead end?"

"What's this I'm hearing?" He pretends to be shocked. "Doom and gloom? From you?"

I elbow him lightly in the side. "It does happen on occasion, you know."

"Well, cut it out. It's my job to be the pessimist and your job to convince me otherwise. Besides, I had enough bad news this weekend to last me for a while, thank you very much."

That's not unexpected, considering he just spent a couple of days gathering intel at the Vampire Court, but that doesn't make it any easier to hear. "Was it really that bad?" I ask.

"It wasn't good," he answers grimly. "Cyrus is calling in favors left and right and getting angrier if those favors aren't delivered at the moment he demands them. The Circle is decimated—the witches and dragons have aligned against the vampires and wolves."

"I thought it's always been like that." The tensions were super high when they were here for the Ludares tournament and challenge. I just assumed it was normal.

"To a certain extent, it has. Our Circle definitely doesn't work with the ease and cohesiveness some of the others do, but it's never been this bad before. At least not in my lifetime. Cyrus is out for blood."

"Yeah, I know. Mine." I'm trying to lighten the mood, but the look Jaxon gives me tells me I didn't succeed. As does the coldness that is back to rolling off him in waves.

"We're not going to let that happen," he says. "You and Hudson have already suffered enough. But one way or another, war is coming. We just need to make sure we're ready for it."

"How are we supposed to do that?" I ask. "I'm a little busy trying to graduate from high school and sort out a mating bond. I don't have time to go to war."

If his expression is anything to go by, my second joke fell as flat as my first. Then again, Jaxon's never really found the topic of my safety to be very funny. I can't blame him, considering I've always felt the same way about his.

"What are we going to do?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't know yet. But we'll figure it out. I promise."

"Wow. Is that optimism twice in one morning from Jaxon Vega? What will the universe think?"

"I won't tell it if you don't."

I laugh, even though I'm not sure he's joking. Still, I start to tease him a little more—anything to loosen up the bitter chill that is so much a part of him these days—but break off when I realize we're at the steps of the castle.

He starts to go up them, but I stop him with a hand on his arm. "Thank you," I whisper.

"For what?" The look he gives me is wary.

"For...everything," I say, unable to get anything else out as my throat closes up just a little, sorrow for what we've lost mingling with hope over what we just might have a chance to regain—our friendship.

Impulsively, I hug him again, this time pulling his face down so that our cold cheeks are mashed together. At first he's unyielding, but I don't care. "I miss you," I whisper to him as I hold on for an extra few seconds. There is no innuendo in the words, and I know he understands. The last thing I'd ever want to do is lead Jaxon on, but he deserves to know that his friendship means just as much as the mating bond did.

His arms tighten around me, but he doesn't say it back. In fact, he doesn't say anything at all. But he does hold me for several more seconds before he lets me go. I count that as a win—at least until I see his blank face and realize whatever gains I thought I made on the walk have been completely erased.

It's frustrating, infuriating, and I really want to yell at him. To ask him why he's doing this, why he's treating me like this when I haven't done anything to deserve it.

But he's already gone, so far away from me that I know it doesn't matter what I say. It won't get through to him.

So instead of humbling myself anymore, I give him the same parting smile and wave to say goodbye that I gave him to say hello at the gazebo a little while ago, then head up the stairs, telling myself I have enough to do without worrying over what's going on with a guy who has made it very obvious that he only wants me on an all-or-nothing basis—the "nothing" having won out.

But the moment I pull open Katmere Academy's front door, I realize that we've got a bigger problem than what's going on between Jaxon and me. Because every student in the entryway and common room is frozen in anticipation as three wolves move in on Hudson in an ever-tightening circle.

## Not Every Dog Has Its Day



“**S**top!” I yell and start to wade into the fray, but Jaxon is right beside me again, and this time he’s holding my arm in an iron grip.

“Let me go!” I cry out as I try to shake him off.

“I can’t,” he tells me. “If you get in the middle of this, it’ll only make him look weak.”

“He *is* weak!” I growl. “His powers are grounded.” Which is beginning to look like a spectacularly bad idea on my uncle’s part...

“That is exactly why they’re pushing at him,” Jaxon tells me matter-of-factly. “They figure this is the best chance they’ve got. He needs to knock them back himself, or this shit will just keep happening.”

“What if he can’t?” I cry out as one of his attackers shifts so that he’s still mostly human but with a wolf’s head—and teeth. “What if they hurt him?”

Jaxon gives me the same insulted look Hudson gave me the other day in the library, like it’s sacrilege to imagine that a vampire can’t take on three wolves—and win—with just sheer badassery alone.

I don’t like the odds, though. Especially not when so many of the other students are crowding around, egging the wolves on even as Hudson doesn’t back down.

He’s not even ruffled, standing there in the middle of Marc (I should have destroyed the jerk on the Ludares field when I had the chance) and two other wolves I recognize from classes but whose names I don’t know.

No, Hudson looks amused, which might be reassuring if it wasn’t pissing the wolves off so badly. And if it seemed, even a little bit, like he took the threat of them seriously.

But it doesn’t appear that way at all, despite the fact that all three of them are within arm’s reach of Hudson now. I use every ounce of concentration I have to will him to end it now or to walk away, but he does neither. I think

about trying to reach for him through the mating bond, to let him know that I'm here, but I'm afraid of distracting him.

I definitely don't want to give them a reason to stop toying with him and go for the jugular. But that doesn't mean I'm fine with being stuck way back here, out of range if he needs my help.

"You can let me go," I tell Jaxon quietly. "I won't try to get between them."

Jaxon hesitates, but he must decide that I mean it, because his grip loosens significantly. Even as my unspoken *yet* hangs in the air between us. I won't get between them yet.

With Jaxon's grip more supportive than restraining, I start easing my way through the ever-widening crowd until I'm almost at the front row. But when I move to make the final shift, Jaxon right behind me, the group of wolves in front of me deliberately closes the gap.

Unless we want to pick a fight of our own, Jaxon and I are effectively cut off from the front lines.

"It's fine," he whispers to me, even as the guy with the wolf's head leans in and snaps at Hudson, his teeth inches from my mate's face.

I swallow a little shriek as Hudson dodges, then raises a sardonic brow and asks, "You don't really think that's going to impress me, do you? I'm pretty sure the fleas you're carrying have a harsher bite."

"Does he have to taunt them like that?" I moan. The last time Jaxon got in a fight with the wolves, he just walked in and kicked their asses. It was terrifying to watch, but this...this is so much worse. The tension of worrying about Hudson going up against them without his powers is killing me.

Jaxon just snorts. "I'm sorry. Have you met my brother?"

It's a good point, but that doesn't make this any easier to watch. Especially when the wolf lunges again—and gets so close that I swear Hudson could smell his breath before he manages to fade a few steps away.

This time, both brows are up as he glances down at his shoulder. "Does mange run in your family?" he asks as he brushes a tuft of wolf fur off his shoulder. "Because if it doesn't, you might want to see someone about that."

All three wolves growl this time, so loud that the sound reverberates through the room. My stomach is basically doing somersaults now, and not in the good way. I can feel my heartbeat speeding up, can feel a weight pressing down on my chest as panic wells inside me.

"He needs to just finish this," I tell Jaxon, and my voice sounds thin even

to my own ears.

“What he needs is to stop playing with his food and kick their sorry asses,” Jaxon snarls, which means all this tension is getting to him, too.

“Maybe he can’t,” I whisper as Hudson dodges another attack, still without lashing out. “Maybe he needs his powers—”

“That’s some serious faith you’ve got in your mate there, Grace.” I jump a little at the sound of Mekhi’s voice right over my shoulder.

“It’s not a lack of faith in him,” I shoot back without turning around. I’m terrified Hudson will be torn apart right in front of me if I so much as blink. “It’s a total lack of trust that the wolves have so much as one ounce of honor among them all.”

“Fair point,” Mekhi agrees, shifting until he’s on the other side of me, while Luca and Flint move in right behind me. I’m not sure if they’re trying to protect me or if they’re getting in a position to intervene if Hudson needs them. Either way, I’m grateful that they’re here—even if their ridiculously big bodies do take up all the air around me.

“Hudson’s got this, Grace,” Flint murmurs quietly in my ear.

I swallow a scream as Wolf Head lunges at him again. Hudson, in the meantime, doesn’t even seem fazed. He just glances out at the crowd and asks, “Why is there never a newspaper around when you need one?” even as he pretends to smack the wolf on the nose. “Bad doggy.”

Half the crowd gasps (I’m part of that group) while the other half cracks up—including all my friends. Even Jaxon chuckles, and that’s before Hudson continues in the most British voice imaginable.

“Sorry to interrupt your little...ambush? But with all the foaming at the mouth going on here, it seems prudent to ask if you’ve had your rabies shots?”

This time, it’s Marc who lunges straight for him, his hand shifting into a claw as he goes right for Hudson’s face. Hudson, on the other hand, must have decided that he’s taunted the wolves enough, because instead of dodging this time, he stands right where he is and leans back just far enough that Marc rakes his claws down the side of his neck instead of his cheek.

I don’t even try to stop the scream that explodes from my throat—not that I could have if I tried. Jaxon’s hand clamps down on my right shoulder just as Flint’s clamps down on my left.

Jaxon growls. “That was just about not getting into shit with Foster. He let them draw first blood.”



"Well, he did a good job of it," I snarl back, because blood is flowing pretty freely from the claw marks.

Even worse, it's emboldened Marc and the others, who are now closing in on Hudson—Marc and Wolf Head from the front, the third wolf from the back—with the look of people intent on ripping their prey limb from limb.

I wait for Hudson to respond, wait for him to give some kind of clue as to how he plans to handle this latest attack. But for what feels like forever, he does nothing except watch them, his bright-blue eyes going back and forth between the two guys closing in on him from the front.

I'm most worried about the one from the back—who he can't see—but Hudson must sense him, because he shifts a little, making sure that his back is against the wall. But that's the only move he makes as everything seems to happen in slow motion.

Seconds feel like minutes as sweat rolls down my spine. Terror is a wild thing within me, and I'm positive if something doesn't happen soon, I'm going to end up screaming the castle down or throwing myself between Hudson and the wolves. Or both.

Probably both.

But just as Jaxon tenses beside me—probably with shades of the same thoughts running through his head—and I reach down deep to find my gargoyle string, Marc rushes Hudson, with the other two hot on his heels. And Hudson...Hudson does the absolute last thing I would ever expect him to do. Ever.

He grabs Marc by the shoulders and lifts him several feet off the ground. But instead of throwing him and moving on to the next threat, Hudson never lets him go. Instead, he pulls his arms up and to the side (while still holding Marc) and then swings the struggling, snarling wolf like he's a baseball bat straight at Wolf Head, like he's the ball.

And apparently, Hudson is one hell of a batter, because Wolf Head goes flying. Like, bases-loaded, home-run-ball flying, straight across the foyer and out the still-open castle doors. Then, instead of dropping Marc like most players do their bats, he keeps swinging until Marc's body meets the stone wall and the laws of physics go to work.

A collective gasp rises up from the crowd as the sounds of both bone and stone shattering fill the room.

Hudson drops him into a heap of broken limbs and ribs before whirling

around to face the next threat. The third wolf obviously has a death wish or a God complex, because anyone with an ounce of self-preservation is backing away—including every other wolf in the room.

I'm not sure if this guy is worried about losing face or having his ass handed to him by the rest of his pack later, but whatever it is, it keeps him barreling straight at Hudson like a vampire-seeking missile. Hudson doesn't so much as blink. He just braces for the attack, feet grounded and arms loose by his sides until one second before the wolf shifter reaches him. Then he lashes out with his foot and kicks him as hard as he can in the kneecap.

The shifter goes down with a high-pitched whimper, but Hudson isn't done yet. He pulls back his hand and slaps him, hard, right across the face.

The entire room recoils, and I don't even have to ask why. I may be new to the paranormal world, but I don't need to be an expert to know that right there is the biggest insult any male of any species could deliver to another.

Even before Hudson leans down and says, "Next time you want to play, I suggest you bloody well make it worth my time. There's nothing I hate more than being bored."

And then, to add insult to a whole heap of injury, he pats the guy on the head and says, "Good doggy," before dusting his hands off and walking straight toward me.

## Fight or Fright Club



All around me, the guys are whooping and hollering at Hudson's triumph, because testosterone is a thing, but I'm just kind of frozen in shock. I was so scared, so certain that they were going to rip him apart, that I'm having a hard time getting past the fear.

I jump on him as soon as he gets close, throwing my arms around him in a hug. "Don't ever do that again!" I tell him.

"Do what?" He pulls back to look at me, brows lifted, a slightly bemused grin on his face. "Kick some werewolf arse? Because I'm afraid I can't promise that."

I narrow my eyes at him as I pull away, place my hands on my hips. "You know exactly what I mean. I was terrified you were going to get hurt!"

"I tried to tell her you could handle a few dogs, no matter how bad their attitude problem, but she wasn't having it," Mekhi tells him.

"What *was* their problem anyway?" I demand, glancing among Hudson, Flint, Luca, Mekhi, and Jaxon, who is suddenly interested in looking at anyone and everyone but me.

"What do you mean?" Flint answers blankly.

"Why would they just start in on Hudson for no reason? It doesn't make any sense."

All five of them look at me with varying degrees of amusement. "Sure it does," Luca finally says. "With Cole gone, there's a power vacuum as they fight it out for the alpha position. It was a dominance display, pure and simple."

"Pretty sure you mean a *lack* of dominance display," Mekhi snickers. "Except for my man Hudson here."

Hudson just shakes his head, looking more bemused by the second. Once again, I realize just how strange it must feel to realize there are people in your life who have your back, who have faith in you and who genuinely want

you to succeed.

At least until Uncle Finn comes tearing down the hallway, loaded for bear—or, in this case, vampire. “Vega brothers!” he snaps out, looking at Hudson and Jaxon both. “Go wait for me in my office.” When they just kind of stare at him, he adds a “Now!” to the command in a voice that has every single person in the room standing at attention—including the two Vega brothers.

“What did *I* do?” Jaxon asks, an insulted look on his face.

But Uncle Finn gives it right back. “Something, I have no doubt.” He points toward the hallway that leads to his office, then turns to Marise—the vampire who runs the infirmary—and directs, “Get all three of the wolves to the infirmary wing. Have a few of the other seniors help if you need it. I’ll be by later to discuss punishments with them.

“In the meantime—” He turns to look at the still-overcrowded common rooms and orders, “Disperse.”

For once, there’s absolutely no hesitation. The second his eyes sweep the room, people start to scatter.

To be honest, I’m impressed. I didn’t realize Uncle Finn had it in him. He’s always seemed like the kind of headmaster who rules through love, not fear, but apparently he knows how to do the fear thing when he needs to.

I wait for the room to empty out before I approach him, but I’ve barely reached his side when he says, “You too, Grace.”

His voice is a lot quieter with me than it was with the others, but there’s no mistaking the order in it. Still, I’d like to try to explain to him what happened.

“But, Uncle Finn, this wasn’t Hudson’s fault—”

“That’s not for you to decide, Grace.” For the first time ever with me, his voice is cold. My lovable uncle Finn is gone, and in his place is a very pissed-off headmaster, one who apparently isn’t going to take any shit from anyone. Including me. “Now, go to class. The bell’s going to ring any minute.”

As if on cue, the after-lunch chimes start to play the chorus of the old song, “I Put a Spell on You.” Apparently, Billie Eilish’s day at Katmere is done—at least for now.

I squeeze Hudson’s hand, then head to class after stopping by the dining hall to grab an apple, but I can’t concentrate the rest of the day—especially when neither Jaxon nor Hudson returns my texts. I know Hudson was already grounded or on probation or whatever you call it, but Uncle Finn can’t actually kick him out for this, right? He was just defending himself.

Sure, yeah, he egged the wolves on, but it was obvious to anyone with eyes that they were going to attack him first. The fact that he didn't cower in a corner isn't his fault. From the moment I got to Katmere, the wolves have been horrible. If I knew then what I know now, there's no way I would have let Marc and Quinn get away with what they did to me my first night. No way I would have just let it go in the hopes that things wouldn't get worse.

But I did, and now Hudson may get kicked out because of me.

My breath catches. If Hudson gets kicked out of school, he'll not be under Katmere's protection anymore, which means he would be arrested and sent to that horrific prison.

By the time I run into Macy and Gwen later, I've gotten myself totally freaked out. It's been hours, and I haven't heard from either brother—which isn't unusual under normal circumstances these days. But I've texted them both several times that I'm worried and I want to make sure they're okay. And still nothing.

"They're fine," Macy tells me as we walk to our room, but she sounds strange, like something isn't quite right. "They're probably still in my dad's office, along with a bunch of other students. He'll spring them eventually."

"Why are there other students there? You mean the wolves?" I know I sound confused, but that's because I am. I have no idea what's happening here.

Gwen and Macy exchange a long look. "You didn't hear?"

"Hear about what?"

"During lunch. There was an incident before the whole Hudson/werewolf thing happened. In the dining hall."

My blood runs cold. "What kind of incident?"

"The vamps and the witches full-on got into it at the beginning of lunch."

"Vamps? You mean the Order?" I ask, trying to sort things in my mind. "But that doesn't make sense. I saw Luca and Mekhi during the fight Hudson had with the wolves. They didn't look like they'd been in any kind of fight."

"It wasn't the Order. It was a bunch of sophomore and junior vampires—I don't think you know most of them." Macy sounds more freaked out than I've ever heard her. "One grabbed Simone and just started drinking from her, right there in the middle of the dining hall. I think she wanted to kill her."

"Oh my God." My whole body recoils in horror. "Oh my God. Is Simone all right?" No wonder Uncle Finn was so furious over what had happened between Hudson and the wolves.

"She's fine," Gwen says, but there's something in her voice that has me leaning in, double-checking.

"Are you sure?"

"One of the other vamps grabbed Gwen," Macy says quietly. "She almost didn't get away before he could bite her."

"But I did get away," Gwen says forcefully. "Macy and Eden kicked his ass and then took on about six or seven other vampires."

"With help from several other witches and dragons."

"Oh my God," I say again, even though I know I'm beginning to sound like a broken record. "What is happening? Is it a full moon or something?"

I glance outside to where the sun is starting to set, but it's only a quarter moon. So the excuse the wolves use for everything just went out the window.

"It was the weirdest thing," Macy says as we drop Gwen at her door and then continue down the hall to ours. "Everything was fine and then bam, they just started attacking us. And not, like, one of us, like they did with Hudson. They went after, like, seven or eight witches. We couldn't fight them all off—that's how Simone got bit. And Cam."

"Cam? Your old boyfriend?" I ask, incredulous.

"Yeah. And after everything that happened during the challenge, I want to say what goes around comes around. But the vamps can't just do whatever they want to us."

"And neither can the wolves," I add, thinking back on the three who went after Hudson. And what might have happened if they'd gone after someone else.

"Do you think the wolves heard about what happened in the cafeteria and decided to just see what they could get away with while my dad was distracted?" Macy asks as we reach our room.

"That's as good a theory as any, I guess. They've been pretty freaking obnoxious to both Hudson and me since the Ludares challenge." Actually, I'm surprised it's taken Cole's former pack this long to start shit.

"Since you kicked their alpha's ass, you mean?" Macy drops her backpack next to her bed and goes straight for the fridge—and the Ben & Jerry's cookie dough.

"I wasn't going to put it like that, but yeah."

"Why wouldn't you say it like that?" she asks as she opens the bag and holds it out to me. "It's exactly what happened."

“I got my ass kicked on that field, too,” I tell her. “A couple of times.”

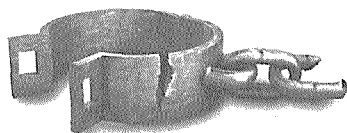
“You were on your own. It’s a miracle you aren’t dead, and we all know it.” She sinks down onto her favorite spot at the end of my bed.

“Yeah, well, I may not be dead, but I’m going to lose my mind if I don’t hear from Hudson or Jaxon soon.” I pull out my phone and check it for the thousandth time in the last half hour. There are a couple of new messages from Mekhi and Flint, both of whom are checking on me and fishing for information at the same time. There’s also a message from Eden telling me to watch my back.

I fire a commiserating text back at her, then tell the guys that I don’t know anything more than they do—which is incredibly frustrating, since I’m eating chocolate chip cookie dough with the headmaster’s daughter as he holds my current mate and my ex-mate hostage in his office.

Considering what happened to Cole the last time Uncle Finn was this furious, there’s no way I’ll be able to rest until I’m sure Hudson and Jaxon aren’t currently falling through some portal to Texas to join him.

## C'est La Vamp



**M**y phone finally buzzes at three a.m. after a long, nerve-racking night. Normally, I wouldn't hear it, but it's not like I'm getting much sleep anyway.

**Hudson:** Sorry

**Hudson:** Foster had our phones

I sit up in bed, heart pounding and phone clutched in my hands. For a second, I can't breathe as relief swamps me, and I have to ask myself what's going on. I managed to stave off a panic attack all night, so why am I having one now that I know he's actually all right?

Tension release? Relief? Fear that there's something bigger going on here than anyone wants to think about, let alone acknowledge?

I sit up so that I can feel the cool wood floors beneath my feet. It's not grass, but here in Alaska, it will do. I take a few breaths, count backward from twenty, focus on the cold seeping through my arches and the balls of my feet.

And nearly cry with relief when the panic subsides almost as easily as it came. Either this wasn't a bad one or I'm finally getting the hang of these things. Either way, I'll take it.

Picking my phone up again, I text Hudson back.

**Me:** What happened?

**Me:** Are you all right?

**Me:** Did you just get out?

I can't believe Foster had students in his office until three in the morning. Surely that's not okay, even with paranormals?

**Hudson:** Jaxon and I got our arses chewed out.

**Hudson:** I'm fine. Got stuck on belfry duty, but I'm good.

**Hudson:** Yeah. Your uncle was on a roll tonight

I switch over to Google just to make sure my definition of belfry is the



right one. Turns out it is.

**Me:** Belfry? Like bats in the belfry?

**Hudson:** More like vamps in the belfry

It's not the answer I'm expecting, and I can't help staring at my phone, wondering if warlocks are capable of performing lobotomies with their wands—and if that's what took him so long in my uncle Finn's office.

**Me:** Did you just make a corny joke?

Three dots appear.

**Hudson:** Maybe

**Me:** Stop before you hurt yourself

**Hudson:** You've got a real mean streak in you

**Hudson:** You know that, right?

**Me:** Know it? I cultivate it

**Hudson:** No you don't

**Hudson:** You're just pouting because I stole your belfry joke

**Me:** I don't pout

**Hudson:** Oh, right. Sorry

**Hudson:** You're deflecting

**Hudson:** Grumpily

**Me:** How do you know that?

**Hudson:** Because I know you

His words give me pause, have me staring at my phone for several seconds as I take in the simplicity and the assurance in those four words. As well as that after living in my head for four months, he does know me—better than almost anyone. Maybe even better than I know myself.

Maybe that's why my fingers are paralyzed over my phone, my mind completely blank as I try to figure out how I should answer him. In the end, I leave the sentiment hanging and revert back to our former conversation. I tell myself it's because I really don't have anything to say to his assertion, but the truth is, I have too much to say.

And I'm afraid to say any of it.

**Me:** So what exactly is belfry duty?

**Hudson:** I'm in charge of the bell tower for the next few weeks

**Hudson:** And the chimes

**Me:** The chimes?

**Me:** Oh, you mean the songs? You get to pick?

**Hudson:** Maybe. Why?

**Me:** Because I've been dying to see what people would do if the chimes started playing Monster Mash

**Me:** Can you do that?

Hudson doesn't reply.

**Me:** Can you?????

Still no reply.

**Me:** Helloooooo

**Hudson:** I think the question is, will I?

**Hudson:** Do you want me to play Five Little Pumpkins, too?

**Me:** Only if it's the Disney version

He sends me the eye roll emoji.

Several seconds pass, and I settle back into bed, wondering if he's done texting for a while. But just when I'm thinking about messaging Jaxon one more time to make sure he's okay, too, my phone buzzes again.

**Hudson:** How about you? You good?

**Me:** I'm not the one who had to fight three werewolves today

**Hudson:** That wasn't a fight. That was a bad day at the dog pound

**Hudson:** And that wasn't an answer

Of course he picked up on my nonanswer. Hudson picks up on everything when it comes to me. He always has. Most of the time, it's seriously inconvenient, but sometimes...sometimes it's nice.

**Me:** I'm fine

**Me:** Did you hear about the vampires in the dining hall?

**Hudson:** Just spent the last several hours with them

**Hudson:** Absolutely cracking it was

**Me:** I bet

**Me:** What was going on with them anyway? Who would do that?

**Hudson:** It is kind of a defining factor of the species

It's my turn to send him an eye roll emoji.

**Me:** You know what I mean

**Hudson:** Yeah

**Hudson:** Jaxon and I can't figure out what caused it

My stomach flips at the mention of Jaxon. He still hasn't texted me back.

**Me:** What's going to happen?

**Hudson:** One of the younger vamps got the boot

**Hudson:** And everyone else is grounded

**Me:** Except for you.

**Hudson:** Can't take away what I don't have. Hence, belfry duty

**Hudson:** C'est la vie

**Me:** What about Jaxon? Is he grounded, too?

I hold my breath, waiting for him to answer. But he doesn't.

At first, I think he's just become distracted by something, but as seconds become minutes, I decide he must have fallen asleep. Which makes sense. It is almost four in the morning, and we've got class in a few hours.

I tell myself I should get some sleep, too, but that doesn't stop me from clutching my phone in my hand when I roll onto my side—just in case he decides to text back.

I'm almost asleep when my phone finally vibrates. It jolts me awake, and I nearly drop it on the floor in my rush to grab it. But this time, it's not Hudson.

**Jaxon:** Everything's fine

Oh, thank God. I clutch my phone and wait, heart pounding, for him to write more. But he doesn't.

Finally, I break down and text:

**Me:** I'm glad

**Me:** Are you grounded?

He doesn't answer.

A few minutes go by, and I'm starting to get annoyed. I know things are off between us, but he doesn't need to act like this. He definitely doesn't need to treat me like dirt when I've spent the last several hours worried about him.

Another text comes in, and my heart is pounding fast and hard as I swipe open my phone, only to realize that it's Hudson again.

**Hudson:** Good night, Grace

**Hudson:** Don't let the werewolves bite...

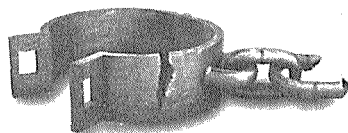
**Me:** Lol

**Me:** Never

**Me:** Good night, Hudson

It's only after I put my phone down and curl up beneath my hot-pink comforter that I realize he never answered my question about Jaxon—almost like he already knew I'd gotten an answer.

## It's Not the Tower That Makes the Prince



The next couple of days pass in what feels like a kind of fugue state. Nothing feels right, everything is off, and tension in the halls—and classes—is off the charts.

The made vamps are pissed one of their own got kicked out. The born vamps are pissed they're getting blamed for what the made vamps did (rightfully so). The witches are pissed the vampires attacked them (even more rightfully so). And the wolves...well, the wolves are just pissed in general (big freaking surprise).

So far, the dragons are okay, but I've got a feeling that's about to change, since I saw a few of the freshman wolves starting something with one of the sophomore dragons on my way to class this morning. Mr. Damasen broke it up before things got too heated, but I don't know how long that will last.

Uncle Finn's got to be close to having the whole school grounded by now, which one would think would make a difference. But it's, like, 60 percent of Katmere has gone aggro and the rest of us are just trying to figure out what's happening—and how to stay out of the way and not get our own butts kicked by Uncle Finn, who is basically on the warpath hourly.

It's even harder than it sounds.

Plus, there's all the makeup work I still have to do *and* the fact that I might have ruined my relationship with Heather—who hasn't answered a single one of my texts in days.

So when Macy texts the group that we should meet in Jaxon's tower after school to study and strategize, I'm all in. At least until I remember what Jaxon has done to the tower. I don't think anyone wants to try to do homework around his handy-dandy workout machines.

In the end, we settle for meeting in Hudson's room—which turns out is in the castle's old undercroft—because it's bigger than any of the rest of our

rooms. And also, it turns out, because it's a lot more isolated than anywhere else in the castle.

I don't think I had a clue just how isolated until I start to wind my way down to it. It's above the tunnels but below Katmere's official first floor, existing in a kind of no-man's-land that you totally miss if you don't know it's there.

I'm not sure how I feel about that—that Jaxon has a tower and Hudson is practically in the basement—at least until I head down the only staircase that leads to the undercroft and realize it is the coolest room in the entire castle—and that includes the library.

To begin with, it's huge. I mean, really, really huge—like runs-the-length-of-the-whole-castle huge. Sure, it's narrower than a lot of the rooms above it, but who cares when everything about this place is incredible?

I thought it would be dark, but it's at least partially aboveground, so there are a ton of windows lining three sides of the room. No wonder there are so many steps leading up to the front door of the castle if this is what's underneath the first floor.

Not to mention that the room itself is filled from one end to the other with the most incredible carved stone arches, which gives the room a seriously amazing gothic vibe. The arches are only about two-thirds as wide as the room, which leaves a long, narrow strip along one side of the undercroft separated from the rest of it. Hudson has apparently turned this part into his own private library.

There are thousands—literally thousands—of books lining the walls and the backside of the arches, and they all look like they've been read about a hundred times each. And in the middle of all those books is a very comfortable, very well-worn-looking chair and ottoman.

I kind of want nothing more than to just dive into his shelves and see what's there, but there's so much more of the room to explore, I don't know where to look first.

The arches themselves are elaborately carved, and each one is a little different. The first one is carved with scene after scene of dragons flying, while the second is filled with stars and moons and even full-on constellations. The third one goes back to dragons, but it's all scenes of home and hearth and family. I want to look at them all, but there are probably twenty-five or thirty, and I don't exactly have the time to examine each one. Or lust after

the gorgeous jewels—some as big as a grapefruit—that are embedded in the arches and used to separate the different scenes.

I look for Hudson, but I must be the first one here. I know I'm fifteen minutes early, but I was hoping to talk to him for a few minutes before everyone else got here. Looks like that's not going to happen, though, since he's missing as well.

There's a seating area farther down the main part of the room, and I head toward it, figuring that's where we're going to be studying. But I can't help getting distracted by how cool this space is...not to mention how very cool the vampire who lives here is.

Besides the ridiculously cool library, which a quick trip through shows is mostly devoted to ancient philosophy, plays and poetry from all eras, and modern-day mystery-thrillers, there's also a whole section of the undercroft that Hudson has devoted to his very extensive, very eclectic vinyl collection. Next to that are shelves filled with photographic equipment, which surprises me, since I had no idea he even liked to take pictures beyond the requisite selfies all vampires take, since they can't see their reflection in mirrors. There's also a couple of top-of-the-line printers, including a 3-D one and some impressive-looking stereo equipment.

To be fair, I just listen to music on my phone or laptop, so I don't know for sure. But it definitely looks state of the art...and expensive.

Next is the small sitting area, which has a desk and an oversize couch, not to mention a couple of purple chairs that look like they were stolen from one of the lounges upstairs. Past that is a space about four arches long that is completely empty, if you discount the different-size targets attached to three sides of the arches. They're all banged up and gouged, and I have no idea what they're for—until I see the workbench against the wall and realize it's loaded with axes.

Hudson throws axes. And, judging from the number of knicks and gouges near the targets' bull's-eyes, he throws them pretty damn well—which, in its own way, is as unexpected as the photography equipment.

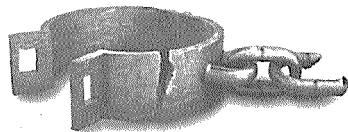
The final section of the room is obviously where he sleeps. It's dominated by a huge king-size bed that's so high off the ground, I'm not sure I could even climb onto it. Not that I'm thinking of climbing onto Hudson's bed, because I'm definitely not. But if I were, I don't think I could manage it without some help.

And its height isn't even the most spectacular thing about the bed. No, that belongs to the elaborate iron bed frame that pretty much screams *I'm a vampire* and the bloodred bedding that only underscores the point.

It's part hilarious—because Hudson really is the most sarcastically unapologetic vampire I've ever met—and part sexy as fuck, because I can't help but picture him lying half naked in the middle of this bed, his skin warm with sleep and his usually perfect hair all messed up.

It's a really good picture, so good, in fact, that my cheeks are burning even before I hear a *thud* sound behind me.

## My Grace



I have about one second to register that I was right about Hudson stealing the chairs from one of the study rooms—the sound I heard was him putting another one down next to the couch.

“Oh, hey!” My voice is about three notes higher than usual as I try to pretend that he didn’t just catch me imagining him half naked while staring at his I-can-fuck-you-senseless-several-times-in-a-row bed. “I know I’m early, but—”

My throat closes up completely as I realize he’s more than noticed the color of my cheeks. Not to mention that he is currently looking between his bed and me with what can only be described as a desperate look in his eyes.

My whole body goes hot, then cold, then hot again, and for a second, there’s nothing but Hudson and me and the inferno incinerating everything between us.

But then he blinks and he’s just Hudson again, standing twenty feet in front of me with a sardonic look in his eyes and a second chair balanced against his hip. “But?” he asks, quirking one perfect, rich mahogany brow.

“Oh, umm. I, umm, wanted to...” I trail off as my brain stops working at the sight of his very nice muscles bunching just a little under his striped oxford shirt as he shifts to put the chair down.

“Wanted to...?” Now both brows are up.

And that’s when it hits me. “You’re wearing jeans.” And not just any jeans—ripped and well-worn and so, so sexy jeans. At least on him. “You never wear jeans.”

“I’ve been alive more than two hundred years, Grace. *Never* is a long time.” He straightens up the chair he just put down, then ambles toward me with a slow, measured walk that gets me even more flustered. I swear, it should be illegal for anyone to look this good. I lick my suddenly too-dry lips.



Hudson stops a few feet in front of me, and the look on his face is so watchful, I can't help wondering what my face looks like. Which then makes me so nervous that I furiously rack my brain, looking for something to say that does not involve me wanting to climb on his...bed.

What I end up with is, "You have a turntable."

Oh my God. This boy lived in my brain for weeks, and we never shut up. All of a sudden, I can barely form a coherent sentence around him. What. The. Everlasting. Hell is going on?

From the way Hudson is slowly nodding, I figure he's probably wondering the same thing. But instead of calling me on my weirdness, he must decide to just roll with it, because he says, "Yeah. I've been collecting vinyl since it came out."

"Oh, right. 'Cause you were..."

The brow is back up. "I was..."

"Alive then." Jesus. Could I sound any more incoherent if I tried? I clear my throat. "Can you turn something on?"

"Now?"

"Yeah, my best friend in San Diego loves vinyl. Her name's Heather and—"

"I know who Heather is." He walks past me, and I nearly have a heart attack thinking he's going to get on the bed, but then he just walks to the nightstand and picks up a controller. "What do you want to listen to?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Whatever you've got on the table will be great."

For a moment, it looks like he's going to say something, but then he just shrugs and hits a button. Seconds later, dark, hard rock music comes through the small speakers he's got positioned all over the room. I don't recognize the music or the lyrics that suddenly flood the air. But that's nothing unusual, considering Hudson's and Jaxon's musical tastes likely span a century.

"What song is this?" I ask.

"Godsmack's 'Love-Hate-Sex-Pain,'" he answers.

"That's..." *Oh my God.* The universe is fucking with me. It's just...fucking with me. Or Hudson is; I don't know which at this point. Maybe both of them. "Interesting."

"You want me to put something else on?" he asks, and I swear he's laughing at me, even though he's totally keeping a straight face.

"No, it's fine. I like it." I release a long breath as I pull out my phone and text Macy to hurry the fuck up.

"I'll put something else on." He heads toward his music area. "I don't have any Harry Styles, but I'm sure I can find something you'll like."

"Hey, don't knock Harry Styles!" I tell him, then breathe a sigh of relief as I realize I'm back to normal. "He is very talented."

"I never said he wasn't." Hudson shoots me an amused glance. "Paranoid much?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I know derision when I hear it."

"When it comes to Harry, I'm pretty sure you hear derision even when there is none," he counters as he puts another record on the turntable.

He has a point, but it's not like I'm about to admit it, so I just kind of shrug as the first notes of Lewis Capaldi's "Grace" start playing. I've heard the song once or twice before and loved it, but I don't know. Something about standing here with Hudson as the lyrics echo through his room has a whole lot of everything welling up inside me.

And when he turns around and looks straight at me just as Lewis sings basically my name over and over, my knees—and everything inside me—go weak. Because there's nothing sarcastic, nothing witty, nothing distant in Hudson's eyes.

There's just him and me and everything remembered and forgotten that stretches between us.

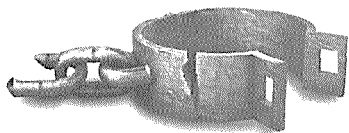
I take a step toward him before I even know I'm going to do it. Then another step and another, until I'm standing right in front of him.

I don't know what's happening, don't know why my heart feels like it's ricocheting around inside my chest. But the one thing I do know is that whatever it is, Hudson feels it, too.

He lifts one trembling hand toward me but stops inches from my face. I can see the indecision in his eyes, can see him wondering if he should touch me or not—if I want him to or not.

And while I don't have a clue about the first question, I've definitely got an answer to the second. Which is why I take one final shaky step toward him, closing the gap he left between us. I don't reach for him, but I do lean forward just enough that his fingertips brush against my cheek.

"My Grace," he whispers so softly that I'm not sure if I imagined it or not. Right before he cups my cheek in the palm of his hand and leans forward.



## Even If It's Broke, Don't Fix It

I forget how to breathe, and as I stare into Hudson's shattered eyes, I'm half convinced oxygen isn't necessary anyway.

At least until Macy calls out, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," as she clomps down the stairs and to my rescue in a pair of chunky heels.

Hudson and I spring apart, and the next thing I know, there's a loud screech as he yanks the needle off the record so fast that I'm pretty sure he scratched what is fast becoming one of my favorite songs.

In the meantime, I all but throw myself onto the nearest chair—which happens to be a rolling desk chair—and end up sliding right off the other side of it and onto my ass just as Macy careens to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, a plate of cookies in her hand.

Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes wide as her gaze bounces between Hudson and me. "What'd I miss?"

"Not a thing," Flint says as he walks in right behind her, carrying a giant tray of tacos that he must have sweet-talked out of the kitchen witches. "The party just got here."

"Is that what you call it?" Hudson says as he flips through his phone and Nothing More's "Go to War" comes blasting through the speakers.

I glare at him. *Be nice*, I mouth.

He rolls his eyes but shrugs and turns the music down to a more reasonable decibel. He doesn't, however, change the song. But this is Hudson. He's only got so much compromise in him.

Flint plops the tacos down on the nearest surface—which happens to be Hudson's desk—then leans over me and asks, "What are you doing on the floor there, Grace?" even as he reaches down and pulls me straight into the air.

Normally, Flint can throw me around with abandon, but either I've turned

to stone (I haven't) or something's wrong with him, because he winces as he sets me on my feet.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He shakes his head, gives me his cockiest grin—the one that tells me something actually *is* wrong—and says, "Nothing fire-roasting a couple of vamps won't fix."

"Will any old vampire do?" Hudson asks, sounding only vaguely curious. "Or do you have a specific few in mind?"

"A very specific few," Luca says as he, Jaxon, and Mekhi walk in together. Luca heads straight to Flint, a look of concern on his face. "A bunch of the mades jumped him in the tunnels this morning."

"You too?" Macy asks as she pulls out her phone. "Does my dad know about this?"

"Yeah, I told him. Added five more people to his grounded list," Flint says glumly.

"Five? I thought there were only four of them?" Luca's gaze narrows.

"There were, but Foster took my powers, too. Said if I didn't get into any trouble between now and Friday, he'd give them back. He's afraid I'll go looking for retribution."

"Maybe I should go looking for you," Jaxon says, and his expression is seriously pissed.

"I held my own," Flint tells him. "Three of them ended up in the infirmary."

"And the fourth?" Luca asks, and for the first time since I've met him, I can sense the danger in him. Usually, he's one of the more easygoing members of the Order, but right now he's anything but. "What if he comes back?"

"The fourth has a sprained wrist and a black eye." Flint pretends to flex his muscles. "Don't worry about me. It'll take more than a few baby vamps to take down a dragon."

"Oh, right. I forgot." Macy rolls her eyes. "You're Iron Man and the Hulk all rolled into one."

"If the shoe fits." He tosses her a wink.

"If the shoe fits, you should shove it up their asses," Eden growls as she walks in with her head tilted back, a bloody cloth pressed against her nose.

"Oh my God!" Macy all but sprints across the room. "What happened?"

"I'm fine." Eden waves her off, but Macy refuses to stop fluttering around her. "More pissed at myself than anything else."

“Who did this to you?” Hudson asks, even as he escorts her over to the couch.

As I pull my first aid kit out of my backpack—again—I can’t help thinking that when Heather’s mom put the thing in there to ward off my panic attacks all those months ago, neither one of us ever thought it’d get this much use.

“Let me see,” I order as I push my way through the wall of big male bodies currently gathered around Eden.

Macy does the same on the other side and settles herself on the couch beside the pissed-off dragon shifter. “Did the vamps come after you, too?”

Eden shakes her head. “The freaking wolves.”

“What the hell is going on?” Mekhi demands. “We’ve been at Katmere for four years. And sure, the factions fight, and there’s a power vacuum with the wolves since Cole got sent away, but we’ve never had this kind of violence before. Not even when...” He breaks off, looking anywhere and everywhere but at Hudson.

“Not even when I was killing off the born-vampire supremacists who planned on helping Cyrus burn down the world?” Hudson’s acerbic tone cuts through the sudden quiet.

Flint tenses up, which makes Luca tense up—things have obviously progressed there more than I thought, and I smile softly.

As I watch the two of them make eyes at each other, I can’t help being glad I didn’t tell him what the Bloodletter did to him—what she did to all of us. It would have just messed with his head, and that wouldn’t have been fair to him or to Luca. Not when they’ve got a good thing going now that he’s finally over Jaxon. And not when he might be hurt all over again knowing that Jaxon didn’t choose him this time, either, even after the fake mating bond magic wore off.

I turn back to Eden. “How’s it feel?”

“I think the bleeding’s stopped,” Eden says as she lowers the balled-up shirt she’s been holding over her nose. “What do you think?”

Macy gasps and jumps to her feet again. Eden’s delicate nose is a whole different shape than it was when we had breakfast this morning, and Macy answers, “What I think is that your nose is broken. You need to go to the infirmary!”

Eden rolls her eyes. “Broken shmoken.”

“I...have absolutely no idea what that means.” I look from her to Macy,

who just grimaces.

"It means we've got this." Flint steps forward.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Eden says, throwing both her hands up. "Slow your roll there, Fire Boy. You are not touching my nose."

"Damn right he isn't," I tell her, horrified. "Macy's right; I'm taking you to see Marise."

"We don't need to do anything that extreme," Eden assures me. Right before she reaches up and pops her own nose back into place.

"Oh my God!" I screech, the sound of cartilage and bone moving back still ringing in my ears as I stare at her in horror. "What did you just do?"

"She fixed her nose," Jaxon tells me calmly, but his eyes are laughing.

"I still think you need to at least see a nurse," Macy hisses at her. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I wanted a taco. I'm starving." She gestures for me to clean off the cut on the bridge of her nose, but before I can, Macy holds out her hands for me to give her the kit.

She pops open the lid and grabs the small bottle of peroxide and a cotton ball. "This is going to hurt a little," she says gently.

"You don't have to worry about hurting me." Eden grins. "It's already starting to heal."

"It can't possibly—" I start, leaning over Macy's hand to look for myself.

"Shifters heal fast," Hudson reminds me quietly. He's less than a foot behind me now, and I shiver as his breath brushes against the back of my neck.

The shiver makes me feel guilty, and I glance at Jaxon out of the corner of my eye. It's one thing for Jaxon to say he's okay with Hudson and me being together and a whole other thing to watch it happen.

His face is so hard, it could be carved from granite, but he isn't looking at me anymore, so I don't think it's about us. To be honest, he isn't looking at anyone with that face, for what it's worth. Just kind of scowling into the distance. I don't know what to think.

"I don't heal fast," I whisper over my shoulder to Hudson.

His hands settle on my hips as he leans in closer and murmurs, "*Animal* shifters heal fast. You have other gifts, Grace."

His breath is warm against my ear, and he's so close now that I'm sure he can feel me trembling. I don't know what "gifts" he's referring to, but my

face is burning just thinking about it.

He obviously notices, because his smile grows wicked as he teases, “You look a little flushed. Do you want me to turn the fire down?”

The jerk. He knows exactly why my cheeks are red.

Determined that two can play his game, I turn around to face him. His hands never leave my hips as I do, though, and now we’re so close that we’re breathing the same air. “I’m fine,” I tell him with a deliberately provoking look, “but I know how sensitive you are to heat. Feel free to turn it down if you need to.”

I was totally referring to the day he burned his hand in my doorway, but as his eyes turn to molten lava, it’s clear he took my words to mean something else entirely.

“I’m all for seeing how much heat I can take, Grace. As long as you’re the one dishing it out.” A devilish grin lifts one side of his mouth and that damn elusive dimple of his appears. As it does, I’m a little shocked to realize just how much I want to lick it. To lick him. Even before his hands tighten on my hips and the last inch of space between his body and mine disappears.

My mouth turns desert dry at the first press of his body against mine. I swallow hard, lick my too-dry lips. And nearly forget how to breathe as Hudson watches the slow movement of my tongue with a predatory gaze. And just like every other time he looks at me like this—every other time he touches me like this—the rest of the room disappears. Everybody vanishes, and it feels like we’re the only two people left in the world.

And as he leans closer, all I want, all I really, *really* want, is to see exactly how much heat we can both take...

“Good God, people. Get a room,” Flint calls out, shattering the moment.

I only thought my face was warm earlier. Now it’s practically on fire, because oh. My. God. Did I almost just climb Hudson like a tree? *In front of everyone?* I’ve never had Jaxon’s issues with PDA, but I’m not an exhibitionist, either. At least I didn’t think I was. But I’m quickly realizing that Hudson is capable of bringing out parts of me I didn’t even know I had.

“We *are* in a room. *My* room in fact,” Hudson tosses over my shoulder at Flint. It’s a light-hearted response, but I can see his face shuttering, see him putting distance between us, as he takes in my embarrassment.

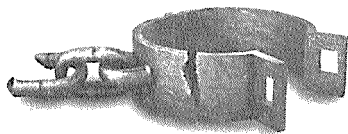
And I can’t help it; I turn around, looking for Jaxon. We’re not mates anymore, but almost making out with Hudson in front of him is so not fair,

and I feel awful. Even before our gazes collide and I see stark, unadulterated pain in the depths of his. But then he blinks and it's gone. Replaced with the cold disinterest I'm growing to hate.

I sigh heavily, not because I want Jaxon to still be suffering at what we lost but because I can tell that with every day that passes, the Jaxon I once loved is slipping even further away—from me and from himself.

A coldness seeps into my bones, and it takes me a solid minute to realize Hudson is gone.





## When the Going Gets Cuffed, the Cuffed Get Going

Macy finishes with Eden's nose pretty quickly, since she flat-out refuses to let her cover it up. Apparently, my unicorn bandages don't fit her badass reputation.

By the time I get my first aid kit packed back up, everyone else has drifted away toward the tacos and drinks. Turns out Hudson had darted out to grab a cooler of blood for the vamps after our *moment*, and now we all gather around the coffee table in Hudson's sitting area.

For the most part, we talk about finals and who has beaten the hell out of whom—as well as who's had the hell beaten out of them—this week. But as Macy is going over a not-so-pleasant encounter she had with a wolf this morning, Flint starts to frown, even though Macy's experience didn't end with bloodshed.

"What about you, Grace?" he asks.

"What about me?" I ask, surprised.

"Have you had any problems in the last few days?"

I shrug. "No more than usual."

"What does that mean?" Hudson asks, his voice sharp as a knife. "Is somebody messing with you?"

Everyone is staring at me now with concern—especially Hudson and Jaxon, both of whom look like they're ready to slaughter a small city or at least a moderately sized boarding school.

"No more than the usual Ludares stuff," I tell them firmly. "Some of the challenge team's still pissed, so they try to mess with me. It's no big deal."

My friends don't look convinced, especially Hudson. "Don't worry about it." I lean forward and rest a hand on his knee. "Seriously. I've got this."

"Do you really have it?" Hudson raises one brow. "Or are you just ignoring it and hoping it will go away?"

I don't know what to say to that—mostly because it's true—but thankfully, Flint saves me from having to come up with a response when he says, "Something you mentioned earlier has me thinking. You said you thought we had enough people trying to beat the hell out of us lately."

"Well, yeah." I gesture to Eden and him. "Obviously."

"So my question is this." He looks around the group. "How many of you have had someone mess with you in the last few days? It doesn't have to be as screwed up as Hudson and the wolves or what happened in the cafeteria with the vamps. It just needs to be out of the ordinary. Who else has had someone mess with them who normally wouldn't?"

I watch in shock as every single one of my friends raises their hands—and every single one, save Macy, is wearing an enchanted cuff binding their magic.

"Everybody?" I manage to choke out once they've lowered their hands again. "Everybody's been messed with?"

"Looks like it," Luca answers quietly. His hand goes to Flint's shoulder, whether for support or because he's trying to calm Flint down, I don't know. "I heard Finn mentioning that it was so bad, he was almost out of cuffs, and there's nowhere to get more."

Hudson and I exchange a look, but then I turn to Jaxon. "What happened to you?"

He shrugs. "Joaquin and Delphina thought they'd take a few potshots at me yesterday."

"Fucking lousy excuses for dragons," Flint snarls. "So what happened?"

"What do you think happened?" Jaxon shoots back. "They lost."

Hudson snorts, but he doesn't say anything to piss Jaxon off, which I appreciate. Jaxon already looks coldly furious.

Jaxon turns to Mekhi, who admits a few witches are regretting their life choices this week. He adds, "I'm fine, but you should check my man Luca out."

"What the hell?" Jaxon's voice cuts like a whip even as he skewers the Order member with a glare.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Flint asks, looking shaken.

"Because it wasn't nearly as bad as what happened to you," Luca tells him. "And I haven't seen you since the vamps got me coming out of my room."

"Vamps?" Hudson asks in a voice that's a lot more chill than Jaxon's. But the look in his eyes is anything but as he leans forward. "*Vampires* went after you?"

“Mades?” Eden asks, and even she sounds a little uneasy at this revelation.

Luca shakes his head. “Borns.”

“Who?” Hudson asks in a voice deadly with calm.

“Do they have a death wish?” Jaxon asks at the same time.

I watch the two of them as they grill Luca on the specifics of his attack before switching back to Mekhi and then finally to Flint and Macy, questioning every detail of what happened to them. Of what vamps did it, how they attacked, and what brought it on.

They’re both regal. They’re both determined. They’re both focused, and they both have amazing depths of kindness if you get past the coldness of one and the sarcasm of the other. And yet, as I watch them ferret out all the details of the attacks, I can’t help comparing them.

I swore I would never do that, but seeing them like this, it’s impossible not to.

Both are clearly furious about what’s been happening to their friends—particularly when the vampires are the aggressors—but the way they handle it is so different. Jaxon is ice-cold yet somehow looks like he’s ready to burn the world to the ground. He’s like a lightning strike—unexpected and thrilling but also dangerous as fuck.

Hudson, on the other hand, has a slow burn. He just kind of sits back and absorbs what’s going on, looking at it from all angles. He asks very specific questions, none of which seems especially meaningful on its own. But by the time he’s done, you realize he’s like the sun—warm and inviting but more than capable of incinerating you with almost no effort at all.

And somehow, I’ve been lucky enough to be mated to both of them. Jaxon, through the machinations of the Bloodletter, and Hudson through...I don’t know what. Fate? Destiny?

I just wish I knew what to do about it. I was so sure that I loved Jaxon, so sure that the boy with the tortured eyes and broken heart was everything I could ever want. But he wasn’t mine to love, not really. Not when the Bloodletter controlled everything so that we would be mates.

Which is the exact opposite of how things happened with Hudson. I hated him at first. I thought he was evil and awful, and I was determined to have nothing to do with him. Then I realized the incredible depths of kindness and hurt under his prickly exterior and ended up friends with him. And now? Now I don’t know what I feel, except confused as hell. That moment Flint

interrupted, the look in his eyes, the way my entire body seemed to burn just from being around him?

Is that real chemistry or just the mating bond? Real emotion or just manufactured by the universe to make sure things go smoothly between mates?

As if.

“But why?” Macy complains, interrupting my thoughts with a voice loud and frustrated in a way I almost never hear from her. “What are they hoping to get by doing this?”

“That’s why I asked how many of us had been hassled,” Flint says quietly. “Because, like Grace said, it seems like it’s happening to us more than anybody else.”

“Yeah, but it also happened to Simone,” Macy objects. “And Cam, and—”

“Misdirection,” Hudson comments softly. “Look over here at all these things that are happening, and don’t pay too much attention to this one big thing that’s happening.”

“Which is?” Eden asks intently.

“They’re getting us out of the way,” Jaxon and Flint say at the exact same time.

“Out of the way?” Luca asks, looking confused. “Of what?”

Eden appears grim as she answers, “I’m pretty sure that’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?”



## Cats Aren't the Only Ones with Nine Lives

“Who?” Mekhi demands. “Cyrus?”

“Of course Cyrus,” Flint tells him. “Who else would it be?”

“Think about who’s been doing the attacks. Mostly wolves and mades, with a few of the born vamps thrown in,” Hudson comments.

“Don’t forget the witches,” Mekhi says with a glower.

“Or the dragons,” Macy adds.

“Yeah, but the only witches and dragons who participated in the attacks are ones we already know are loyal to Cyrus,” I say as what they’re getting at finally becomes clear. “All of this has been masterminded by your father.”

“Looks that way,” Jaxon says, and there is absolutely no emotion in his voice as he says it.

“War is coming to Katmere—and the rest of the world. I’ve known it for two years,” Hudson says pointedly, glancing briefly at Flint before continuing. “I think we all know it now.”

My heart is pounding in my chest. “Cyrus is really planning to attack Katmere?” A thought occurs to me, and I ask Hudson, “Do you know what his plan was last year? What were those students about to do that made you”—I wave my hand—“do what you did?”

I can tell by Hudson’s wide gaze that no one has bothered to ask him this before. Not the details, at least. But I want to know. And since all eyes are staring at Hudson expectantly, I’m clearly not the only one interested in his answer.

Hudson crosses his arms as he leans against the wall. “They were planning to take control of Katmere and hold the students hostage to force all the major ruling families, whose kids attend this school, to join his attack on humans.” There’s a collective gasp from everyone in the room, but Hudson continues. “As proof of his seriousness, he’d ordered those students to kill the firstborn

of every family with more than one child at Katmere.”

“My God,” Luca whispers, and Flint pales. Luca has a little brother in the ninth grade, which would mean... I shudder. I can’t even imagine Katmere, our friend group, without Luca in it.

I knew Katmere was an elite school for vampires, werewolves, witches, and dragons, but I had no idea every major ruling family had students here. It was a brilliant plan, honestly. How do you control powerful men and women all around the world? Threaten their children. And how easy to do so when they all happen to be in the same place at the same time.

“Your father’s a real bastard,” Eden growls.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Hudson says without an ounce of humor.

“Why didn’t you tell someone? Instead of just killing them?” Flint asks, and it’s hard not to realize this new information is difficult for the dragon to swallow. If true, it would mean his own brother was willing to do some pretty heinous things for Cyrus.

Hudson spears him with a hard gaze. “I did. No one believed me.”

“You told Uncle Finn.” It’s a statement, not a question. I can see it in his gaze, the answer.

“I don’t blame him. I probably wouldn’t have believed me, either.” He shrugs, but I can tell it bothers him. As our gazes collide, I note the stark pain swimming in his blue eyes before he quickly shutters them. And I know, as sure as I will take my next breath, Hudson is blaming himself. If he’d been a different guy, if he’d been anyone but Cyrus’s kid, things might have ended differently.

“So what do we do?” Mekhi asks. “And do we think this is what’s going on? Cyrus is going to try to take Katmere again?”

“I’m sorry my dad didn’t believe you, Hudson,” Macy says softly. “But he would listen now, and once he realizes Cyrus is behind putting his students in danger, he’ll go after him—in the Circle first, and then if that doesn’t work, he’ll go straight to the source.”

Tears fill her eyes, so she closes them and whispers, “And then Cyrus will kill him.”

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Eden assures her.

“No way,” Mekhi agrees as Flint nods along.

“We can’t tell him,” I say. It’s the only thing that makes sense. “If we tell him, he will try to do something—all alone and without proof—and Cyrus

will ensure he's removed from the chessboard. One way or another."

"You can say that, but how are we going to stop Cyrus without his help?" Macy asks. "Especially since Cyrus and Delilah are coming for graduation."

"They are?" Hudson asks sharply. "How do you know that? I haven't heard anything about it."

"They RSVP'd with Dad, as the graduation announcements requested." She spins her phone around and around in her hand. "He was unpleasantly surprised they were coming, too."

"I thought it would take that asshole longer to heal." Hudson doesn't sound pleased that it hasn't.

And suddenly I know what we have to do. The only thing we *can* do. We were already planning on finding the Crown anyway to thwart Hudson's arrest warrant—which makes even more sense why Cyrus wants the only guy who stopped him last time out of the way, but now...now the stakes are even higher. We'll need the Crown if we have any hope of saving the students at Katmere...and preventing a war. Maybe if we're lucky, Cyrus won't even make a move if he knows we have it.

I try to catch Hudson's gaze, to make sure we're on the same page with this plan, but he's staring at his phone, deep in thought.

So instead of waiting to see what he thinks, I take a deep breath and say, "We need to find the Crown before he gets here."

Hudson still doesn't meet my gaze but nods. "It's the only chance we've got."

I continue to try to get Hudson's attention as Mekhi explains to everyone else about the arrest warrant for Hudson, what the Bloodletter said about the Blacksmith, and Hudson's theory about the giants. But he won't look up. Instead, he stares silently at his phone, occasionally swiping his finger across the screen. I know he's feeling guilty right now. He killed all those students, and it didn't stop a damn thing. I can tell in the rigid way he's holding his shoulders, he's wrestling with his decisions. I briefly consider walking over to him, but if he's this uncomfortable about our *distraction* earlier, I feel like that would just make him even more uncomfortable.

Distraction. Ha. What an insignificant word to describe what happens every time we get close. It feels more like my senses are just so focused on taking in everything that is Hudson, not missing a single breath, a single twitch of his mouth, a single crinkle of his eyes, that I have no senses left to

notice that we're not the only two people in the world.

"You know, that means we have to go to Giant City sooner rather than later," Luca says.

"Hell yeah." Flint grins. "Those giants really know how to party." He wraps an arm around Luca's shoulders and whispers something in his ear, and Luca blushes. Watching them makes me smile, despite all the shit that's about to come down on us. Flint deserves someone who is wild about him.

"How about Friday?" Mekhi suggests. "It's a staff workshop day, so we've got it off. I could use a break from all the studying anyway." Mekhi coughs, then adds, "I've always wanted to try the Gorbenschlam Challenge. Want to join me for one, Macy?"

"Mekhi!" Macy looks horrified, but underneath the horror, my cousin also looks...interested.

"I'll take that as a yes." Mekhi grins.

Macy groans. "Fine. But only one."

Mekhi winks at her. "I've heard that's all it takes."

And now my cousin's cheeks are positively on fire, but I notice she doesn't correct Mekhi, either. Next to her, Eden shifts her gaze between Macy and Mekhi, and I can't help but wonder if *she* was interested in Macy herself. Well, if she was, she better get to moving. Mekhi doesn't look like the type to wait around when he sees something he wants, and if the gleam in his gaze is any indication, the vampire is most definitely interested in Macy.

An awkward silence falls, so I ask to break the tension, "What's Gorbenschlam? Can I try it, too?"

Hudson looks up from his phone and arrows me with a sharp gaze. "It's only for couples, Grace."

"I thought—" I start to say I thought *we* were a couple, but then his meaning hits me in the chest, and I narrow my gaze on him, a clear message in its depths that we *will* be talking about this later.

Macy rushes in to explain. "It's a giant stein of beer that you race to see who can finish first. Loser buys the round—which is not cheap, considering I mean quite literally a *giant*-size mug. Legal drinking age in Giant City is fourteen, and they take their beer drinking very seriously." She grins at me.

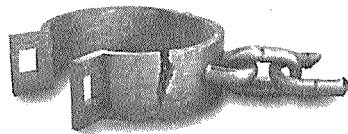
"Ah, okay, well, I'm not a huge fan of beer, but I bet Eden and I could race you two," I suggest, and Eden lets out a whoop and we fist-bump. I send an arched look at Hudson, and he mouths back, *Touché*.



My shoulders sag a bit that he seems to be over his snit. I'll be the first to admit I love matching wits with Hudson. When we argue, I forget about my anxiety, about my problems, about everything. I feel alive in the moment. But this doesn't feel like one of our regular fights. This feels like a lot more is going on, and instead of freeing me from my panic attacks, a bubble of fear is growing in my belly.

"Okay, then," Flint says as he picks up a taco with his patented grin. "Let's do this thing."

## With Enemies Like These, Who Needs Friends?



**W**e study for a couple of hours more, but eventually we're all tired of schoolwork, and the gathering breaks up.

Hudson looks bemused as we help him clean up. And I get it. We're a little loud and a lot disorganized as we talk and move over and around one another.

For a guy who has lived such a solitary existence, this must feel like absolute chaos. But there's something in his eyes, something in the *very* slight upward tilt of his lips that tells me this is good for him. That it's past time Hudson Vega stopped being a loner and got himself a fun, loyal, and absolutely ridiculous group of friends. The fact that most of us were once his enemies doesn't matter. He's part of the group now, whether he likes it or not.

Maybe that's why I stop Flint and Luca as they start to pick up the purple chairs to carry back to the study lounge. "Leave them," I say, grinning at Hudson, who's now looking at me with wide eyes. "We've got lots to do in the next couple of weeks. I'm sure we'll be down here again."

"Good call, New Girl," Flint tells me, holding up a hand for a fist bump. "I didn't even get a chance to try out any of those sick axes over there."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Luca tells him as he herds him toward the exit. "None of us has time for an ax in the back tonight."

"Excuse you." Flint makes a face at him. "I have excellent aim, thank you very much."

"Oh yeah?" Luca wraps his arm around Flint's waist with a grin. "Maybe you could show me sometime."

Mekhi snorts at that, which makes Macy giggle as they, too, make their way toward the door. Jaxon doesn't say anything, but for just a moment, I can see amusement lurking in the depths of his eyes, too.

At least until Macy turns around and asks, "Are you coming, Grace?"

Everyone is looking at me—Jaxon and Hudson included—and my palms

grow damp. I should say yes, should just walk right out of here with the rest of them, but the truth is I want to talk to Hudson. More, I want to figure out what happened between us earlier and if it means something or if it's just an aberration.

"I'll, um, I'll be up in a few minutes. I just need to talk to Hudson about something real fast."

"Is that what you kids are calling it these days?" Eden murmurs as she scoots past me, backpack over her shoulder and wide grin on her face.

She didn't say it loud enough for anyone else to hear, but as I watch them leave, I realize that doesn't matter. If my friends hadn't been thinking something was happening already, my bright-red cheeks would definitely convince them.

I glance at Jaxon as he nears, but his face is surprisingly warm. He leans down and whispers in my ear, "It's all good, Grace," before heading up the stairs. And I want to cry at what that must have cost him.

I love Jaxon. I do. He saved me when I got here, brought me out of the frozen depths of depression and numbness that had surrounded me since my parents died. I'll be grateful to him for that for the rest of my life. He was my first love. And those never go away, not really.

But then there's Hudson, who sees so much more than the weak, wounded girl I used to be. He sees who I really am and who I have the potential to be. Jaxon wanted to protect me, wanted to take care of me, but Hudson wants to help me learn how to take care of myself. And I know, if I were to give in to these mating bond feelings coursing through my body—and it doesn't work out...

Losing Jaxon was terrible, but our relationship was struggling before our bond was broken, if I'm being honest. Struggling between the girl he fell in love with and the girl I wanted to become. We hadn't known each other before we were mated, and there's a part of me that knows deep down, part of the reason I loved Jaxon with all my heart was because he loved me back just as much. We needed each other. We were both in pain, and we filled an emptiness we didn't know how to fill on our own.

But with Hudson, it will always be different. He knows me better than anyone, better than myself. And even though I can't remember those months we were trapped together, we've spent the last several weeks becoming real friends.

And that's what really terrifies me.

When Jaxon broke up with me, he walked away from only a piece of me, the piece he knew. The only piece the wounded girl I was could let him see. But if Hudson were to reject me? It wouldn't just be a piece of me—he would be rejecting *all* of me. And that...would be oh so much more devastating. That would break me in places I didn't even know I could break.

But after what happened with Hudson earlier tonight...I don't know. Suddenly, it feels like all the hiding, all the burying my head, all the pretending this isn't happening doesn't just have the ability to hurt me—but Hudson, too. Like if I don't do something soon, I'm going to destroy any chance we have, and that thought is more frightening, even, than making a decision is.

“Are you planning on just hiding out in here all night, or do you actually have something to say?” Hudson asks, and he's back in full sardonic mode.



## Honesty Is the Most Uncomfortable Policy

**A**re you fucking kidding me? I'm standing here worried about trying to figure out how not to shatter us both, and he's going to come at me with that?

My nerves disappear in a second, and now I'm just pissed off. Doesn't he realize how hard it was for me to say I wanted to stay with him, to admit to what that implied, to *everyone*? And he's going to stand there and pick at me?

"Oh, you can bet I most definitely have *something* to say to you." I square my shoulders as I look him dead in the eyes. "But I don't think you deserve to hear it now."

I grab my backpack from its spot next to the couch, ignoring the tears that are burning in the backs of my eyes for no reason that I can understand. "Let me know when you're not in asshole mode, and maybe we can talk."

"Hey." I freeze as Hudson's hand rests lightly on my shoulder. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

"You seem to be saying that a lot lately," I tell him with a shrug, but I still don't turn around to face him. I need a few more seconds to make sure all traces of those ridiculous tears are gone. And also I'm embarrassed—of the tears, of the situation, of my inability to deal with it properly—and now facing him feels all but impossible. "I'm just going to go."

I duck out from beneath his hand and make a beeline for the door. If I'm really fast and really lucky, maybe he'll just let me—

Or maybe he won't. I freeze when suddenly, he's right there, blocking my path. I stare at one of the holes in those too-sexy-for-my-own-good jeans and pray for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

Is one of Jaxon's infamous earthquakes really too much to ask for in this situation? Or—and I'm just spitballing here—some giant, snow-dwelling leviathan to burrow through the stone floor in search of its next meal?

Turns out the paranormal world isn't with me here—big shock—because the jeans, and the legs they are encasing, don't move an inch. And neither does the guy they're attached to.

Because of course he doesn't. This is Hudson, and he's never made things easy for me. Maybe if he had, we wouldn't be in this situation. Milquetoast is so much easier to walk away from.

"Talk to me, Grace," he says. "You can't keep blowing hot and cold. It's not fair to either of us."

What the actual fu— "What did you just say to me?" My gaze zeroes in on his with the fury of a thousand suns. "You think *I* am the one blowing hot and cold? *Me?*" I laugh, but there isn't a sliver of humor in it. "Says the guy who flirts with me in front of everyone one second, then disappears the next. Who says he wants to see how much heat we can take, then tells *our friends* that we're not a couple."

I poke him in the chest, but he doesn't budge. Fucking vampires. But I'm just getting started. "I thought we were going to give this thing between us a chance, but you don't seem capable of deciding what you want. Do you have any idea how scared I am? And yet you don't see me pulling this shit on you!"

"No, you just keep checking Jaxon's reaction every time you touch me." His words land like a bomb at our feet.

And I roll my eyes. Hard. "Of course I'm checking Jaxon's reactions. He's innocent in all of this."

"You think I don't fucking know that? Why do you think I left to get the vamps' blood?" His jaw clenches so hard, I think he's going to crack a molar. "I love my brother more than you ever will. I *died* for him. But I'm not going to die for him again, and what you're doing to me, Grace—you're killing me slowly."

He sighs, running a hand through his hair in frustration, leaving the ends sticking up at odd angles. It should make him look ridiculous, but it just makes him seem...vulnerable. Maybe, just maybe, Hudson is as scared as I am at the intensity between us.

So I pull in a deep breath and take a chance. "Are you scared, Hudson?"

He holds my gaze so long, I'm not sure he's going to say anything. But then the weight of his answer seems to be too much for him to carry, and he sinks onto the stairs below me, his arms resting on his knees. And says with a ragged voice, "More than you'll ever know."

And now I see it. His scars.

This poor boy has had everyone he's ever loved taken from him. Why wouldn't he expect the same thing to happen with his mate? And he would let me go without a fight. I know it. If I told him I wanted Jaxon, he would sacrifice his happiness for mine. For Jaxon's.

I swallow as I realize he deserves to know that's not going to happen. On a soft breath, I tell him, "Jaxon gave us his blessing as he left tonight."

His eyebrows shoot up. "He did?"

"Yes." I nod. And because he deserves to know this, too, I add, "I only look at Jaxon after we touch because I don't want to hurt him—with my happiness."

I watch as my words sink in, watch as a slow smile gently lifts one corner of his mouth. And cocky Hudson comes back as quickly as he left as he says, "So you like it when I touch you, eh?"

I roll my eyes. "Leave it to you to only focus on that."

He grins back at me. "Hey, I can't help it if I've got game."

"It's just the mating bond, you goof," I tease, but he sobers.

"Is that what you think?"

I bite my lip. "How can I not?"

He seems to ponder my words for a moment before he stands and says, "We can take things slow, Grace. It's something to build on."

And I can't stop the tears of joy welling up in my eyes. "Thank you."

He pulls me into a hug, his large arms wrapping around my shoulders and pulling my head against his chest, and I try to ignore how good he smells up close like this.

Like sandalwood and warm ginger.

Like amber and an open flame.

*Like safety*, the voice deep inside me whispers.

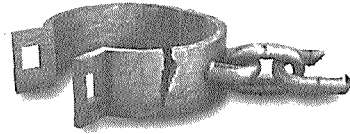
"Want to watch the rest of *Empire Strikes Back*?" he asks.

"There's nothing I'd like to do more," I admit. Then I imagine us curled up on his huge, sexy-as-fuck red bed and add, "On the couch."

Hudson chuckles. "Of course."

But as he laces our hands together and leads me to his couch, I can't help wondering if going slow will take the pressure off...or if it will just make everything explode.

## Bite the Big One



“So, umm...how did last night go with Hudson?” Macy asks as we pack up some things to take to Giant City with us early the next morning. “You know, if you want to help your cousin live vicariously and all.”

I grab a shirt and fold it, placing it into my backpack. “Nothing happened. We watched a movie.”

“Above or below the sheets?” She winks at me, and I snort-laugh.

“On the *couch*,” I clarify. Although my cheeks heat as I remember how he tucked me snugly against his side, his large hand covering mine where it rested against his muscled thigh. True to his word, he didn’t make a single move on me all night.

Well, until the end when we got into a fight about why Princess Leia couldn’t admit she loved Han Solo until it was too late. One minute, we were just casually hanging out, and the next we were sniping at each other over a fictional character. One minute, we were in the friend zone, and the next all I could think about was ripping his clothes off and climbing with him under those oh-so-sexy sheets.

Instead, I made an excuse and hustled back to my room as fast as I could, his last taunt still echoing in my ears.

*I’ll be here when you change your mind.*

If *I change my mind*, I shot back.

And he laughed. He actually laughed. The jerk.

I didn’t run because I was scared—or at least, not just because I was scared.

I ran because if the heat in our arguments is any indication, I’m a little afraid of what we’ll burn down if we actually get together.

Or maybe the better question is, what *won’t* we burn down?

I don’t know if I’m ready for that, don’t know if I’m ready for any of this.



"You look exhausted," Macy says in a deliberately upbeat voice.

Yeah, well, that happens when you spend the night tossing and turning over relationship issues.

"Hudson just said something I didn't like at the end of the evening." I cross to my closet and reach for my black coat because it matches my mood.

But Macy is right there, taking it out of my hand and putting it back in the closet. "No brooding," she tells me. "I'm totally in that boy's corner... until he hurts you. Just say the word, and then I'll help bury the body."

"Nah, it wasn't that bad. I'm not brooding." It's a blatant lie, but apparently I'm doing a lot of that today, so what's one more?

"Oh, right. Is stewing better? Languishing? What verb would you like?"

"Ruminating," I tell her as I crack up, because it's impossible to be sad around Macy for long. Even when she's still a little sad herself. "I'm *ruminating* over the state of my affairs."

"Oh, well, ruminate away. But do it in your favorite color." She takes my hot-pink coat off the hanger and hands it to me. "It'll make you feel better."

I look from her to the coat as it occurs to me that now would be a perfect time to tell her that hot pink is very definitely not my favorite color. But she's smiling for the first time in quite a while, the prospect of this trip away from school making her happy in a way she hasn't been since Xavier. Telling her I don't like pink would be like kicking a puppy just to hear it cry. I can't do it.

Plus, the ridiculous color is growing on me. Of course, the comforter is definitely overkill, but the coat really isn't that bad.

"What time is it?" I ask as I slide the coat on, then double-check my backpack to make sure I have everything I might need. The plan is to travel down this morning and then back up tomorrow night, but I want to make sure I've brought enough work to do in case we stay until Sunday.

I mean, yeah, we're going to spend most of our time looking for the Blacksmith and, hopefully, talking to him once we find him, but still. There'll be some downtime, and I want to take advantage of it by finishing my makeup architecture project and my essay for history. If I'm lucky, Jaxon will be in a decent-enough mood to follow through on the help he offered the other day. And if he isn't, well, maybe one of my other friends could be persuaded.

"Nine fifteen," Macy answers as she pulls on her rainbow-colored jacket.

It's a change from the black she's been wearing lately, and when I raise a pleased brow at her, she just shrugs. "I think maybe I want to feel good while I ruminate, too."

Now I'm full-out grinning. "I think that sounds like a really great idea."

She nods and whispers, "Me too."

"You know, today is my mom's birthday," I say as we make our way to Macy's secret passageway—no need to tip off any of our new and unappreciated enemies that we're leaving school for a couple of days. The last thing we need is one of them clueing in that Hudson is no longer on Katmere Academy property. With how protected Giant City is with magic, we all feel fairly sure even if Cyrus discovered we were there, we'd be gone before he could marshal the Watch in the city walls anyway. Still, no sense taking a chance and advertising our adventure, either.

"Her birthday?" Macy's eyes go wide. "Oh, Grace, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Nothing to be sorry about," I tell her as I think of my free-spirited mother, with her love of flowers and poetry and midnight pancakes. "I mean, yeah, usually it makes me sad to think about her, but it's hard to be sad on her birthday. It was always one of my favorite days of the year."

"Really?" Macy looks charmed at the idea. "How come?"

"We always took the day off school and spent it together—you know she was a high school teacher, right?"

"I didn't remember that, no." She grins. "Was she always correcting your grammar?"

I laugh. "Not even close. She was, however, always giving me a book to read—and then making me talk about the books with her over brunch at our favorite restaurant. It was right on the water, and if it was the right time of year, we'd get to walk in the cove later and watch the seals that come up to the sand to give birth and take care of their babies."

Macy's eyes go huge. "Oh my gosh. That's amazing!"

"It was, yeah." I smile, remembering. "There was one weekend a month my dad had to work, and that was always our book brunch time. She was big on finding favorite passages to talk about—and memorize."

"That's why you're always quoting some book! I've wondered."

"Yeah, that's why."

"Hudson must love that. He's always quoting books, too."

I laugh. "Hudson is the only person I know who actually reads more than my mom did."

"No shit. And considering how long he's been alive, I'm pretty sure he's read almost everything."

"I don't know about everything, but the boy has read a lot."

We're walking down the section of the passage that has all my favorite stickers in it, and I grin as we pass one that says *Hex the Patriarchy* and another that's a crystal ball with the words *Looks Like You're Screwed* written inside it. It makes me laugh every time.

"So is that what you did on your mom's birthday? Go to brunch and talk about books?"

"It's where we started, yeah. Then we would go shopping and buy an outrageously expensive outfit just for fun. And we'd end up at home making the most fantastic birthday cake we could find. My mom was a great cook."

"Yeah, she was," Macy agrees. "Her cookies were legendary. She used to send them, even after you guys stopped visiting."

My smile fades. "I always hated that we stopped coming."

"Me too. The last time was that summer before I turned nine. Do you remember?"

"I do, yeah. We had picnics every day." I haven't thought about that summer in years.

"Every day," she says with a laugh. "With all the cookies from your mom."

"Yes." If I close my eyes, I can still smell her lemon cookies. "And your mom's tea."

Macy's smile fades. "Yeah."

"I'm sorry," I tell her as we start down a staircase to the first floor. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay. My mom really did make the best tea blends," Macy says with a shrug. "Especially the hibiscus one."

"That was the red one, right?"

She nods.

She puts up the no-trespassing sign, and I don't ask anything else about her mom. Losing my mom was one of the worst things that ever happened to me, but I can't imagine how I would feel if she had just walked out one day. Just disappeared off the face of the earth after nine years of being Mom of the Year.

I was only ten when it happened, but I remember Uncle Finn freaking out. I remember dozens of late-night phone calls between him and my parents. My dad even flew up to Alaska for a few weeks when it happened to help my uncle talk to police. Eventually it was concluded that no foul play was involved, that Aunt Rowena had simply decided to not come home one day. Uncle Finn didn't believe it.

He'd searched for her for years, to no avail. I can't imagine what that must have been like—for him or for Macy.

I hug my cousin as we head down the passage to one of the exit doors on the first floor. She hugs me back and tells me I'm the best cousin ever. Then we push the final door open and step out into the slowly melting snow to find Hudson, Flint, Luca, Eden, Jaxon, and Mekhi already waiting on us.

"It's about time," Hudson says. They're the first words he's spoken to me since last night, and I barely keep my smile under control. Sure, they're surly and not exactly polite, but that doesn't bother me. Hudson is Hudson, after all, and I'm sure he slept about as well as I did.

"You're welcome to get there on your own," Macy says and gives him a sharp look, then walks toward the edge of the clearing, tugs open her magic bag, and pulls out her wand.

Hudson glances at me like, *what's that all about*, but I just shrug and look as innocent as I can. No need for him to know I was *ruminating* about him earlier.

Everyone stands back as Macy sets eight candles on the ground, evenly spaced in a circle around us. "Gwen helped me create a portal big enough for all of us to go at once, since she's visited Giant City before. These candles will keep this one available to us, and correct for the rotation of the Earth, too."

Macy's been practicing building portals all week with Gwen, and I am so proud of her when she creates this one on her first attempt. One minute, we're standing on a field, patches of grass visible beneath the melting snow, and the next we're sliding through the earth, the walls of the portal flying by so fast, it looks like we're inside a brilliant kaleidoscope.

I reach out with a hand and let my fingers flutter through the jeweled-tone lights, because of course Macy's portal sparkles like a rainbow. I turn to share my delight with Hudson, but he's already grinning. He knows how special this is, too.

Before I know it, the rainbows are gone, and we're standing in the middle

of a forest of massive trees, sun-dappled light peeking between their branches.

Well, everyone else is standing. I'm kneeling on the mossy forest floor because apparently, I still can't figure out how to land on my feet.

Hudson helps me up as Macy grins at everyone. "Pretty kick-ass, right?"

"So kick-ass," Hudson tells her. "You made it look easy."

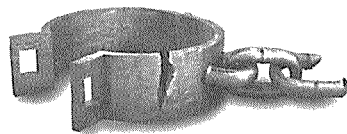
"Maybe it was easy," she tells him, still a little snooty because of our conversation earlier.

"Well then, that just makes you more kick-ass, doesn't it?" he counters. And she folds like a bad poker hand, because Hudson is just that charming when he wants to be.

The two of them high-five while the rest of us look around. And realize that no matter how awesome the portal is, we still have a problem.

Because there's no city—Giant or otherwise—anywhere around.

## So Down-to-Earth



“So what do you think?” Flint asks Macy with a wide smile. “Getting any earth vibes?”

“I’m not a seismograph,” she tells him with a roll of her eyes. “I can’t just read the earth hundreds of miles in all directions.”

“I thought that was the plan?” Luca asks, sliding a hand around Flint’s waist as he joins us.

“The plan is for me to tap into the earth magic they use to keep themselves and their city hidden,” she answers, rummaging in her magic pack around her waist and then inside her backpack. “Which I’m going to try to do.”

“What can we do to help?” Eden asks as she comes up behind Macy.

“Stay out of my way,” she says, even as she shoots Eden a grin over her shoulder. “I know it goes against the dragon superiority code, but this is one of those times when witches have to do the heavy lifting.” She flexes her fingers together, like she’s preparing for a workout at the gym.

“Why don’t you try to help her, Grace?” Hudson says, and all eyes turn to me.

“I thought this was a witch thing,” I tell him uneasily. “How can a gargoyle help?”

“Earth magic is what heals you. You probably have some kind of affinity for it.”

Ugh. I hate even thinking about the day Hudson buried me alive to save my life. I know he had to do it, but it’s still one of the most awful things that has ever happened to me. Maybe even the *most* awful, and I include the whole Lia human-sacrifice debacle in that. I’ve wanted to ask him dozens of times how he knew to do that, but I’m smart enough to know the panic attack doing so would unleash. I have enough panic attacks these days without deliberately courting another one. But that’s the whole thing, isn’t it? I drop my head and sigh, because no matter how much I want to deny it, Hudson’s

right. I have *got* to get better about dealing with conflict. And I guess there's no time like the present to start.

I turn back to Hudson, but he's not where I expect him to be. Instead, he's moved closer, and as our gazes meet, I can see the encouragement I need in his bright-blue eyes. He wants me to ask the question, needs me to trust him enough to take a leap of faith.

And he's right. I know he is. I've wanted to know the answer to this question for weeks—am I really going to let a little fear stop me from finding out more about my gargoyle? And about myself?

I take a deep breath, blow it out slowly. And ask, "So, umm... How *did* you know burying me in the earth would heal me?"

The smile on his face is enough to light up the entire forest as he answers, "I remembered reading in one of the books in the library that gargoyles were immune to all forms of elemental magic—earth, air, fire, and water. We already knew you could control water and we already knew you could channel magic, so I figured gargoyles weren't so much immune to the magic as they were able to deflect it—to channel it away from them in much the same way they could channel it into them.

"And if that was true, then you could manipulate it. You manipulated water, so why not all the other elements, too?"

I wait for my heart to start beating too fast, for my lungs to empty of air at the reminder of being buried alive. But it doesn't happen. Instead, all I can think about is finding out what else I might be able to do. "But how did you go from thinking about elemental magic in general to knowing earth magic could heal me?"

He lifts a brow even as he gives me a self-satisfied smile. "The Unkillable Beast, of course."

Macy leans against a tree as her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline. "What does *he* have to do with earth magic?"

"He was huge, remember?" Hudson glances at her before turning back to me. "He looked like he'd swallowed boulders for breakfast for the last hundred years."

"And?" Flint asks. He looks as fascinated with all this as I am.

Hudson winks at me. "Babe, if people kept coming to kill you and you couldn't run away but you *could* use earth magic, what would *you* do?"

My eyes widen, and not just because he called me babe, although that

does make my heart skip a beat or two. "I'd make myself as big and badass as I possibly could."

He nods. "And use earth magic to *heal* your stone body, right? Otherwise, how is a gargoyle trapped in a stone cave *unkillable*?"

Mekhi whistles. "Being a gargoyle just got about a hundred times more badass than it already was."

"A thousand times," Macy contradicts. "Seriously, wow." She's grinning even wider than Hudson is.

Yeah, wow. Because in the middle of Hudson's explanation, something else hit me. This guy, this amazing guy knew I was afraid to ask questions, afraid of finding out something I couldn't handle. So he did it for me, just so he would have the answer when I was ready to ask.

I walk toward him, and I'm not thinking about PDA. I'm not worrying about what Mekhi or Luca will think, or even Jaxon. All I'm thinking about is Hudson as I wrap my arms around him and hold him as tightly as I can.

He hesitates for a second like he's surprised, but then his arms snake around my waist, and he hugs me back. He bends over enough to rest his cheek on my head, and I close my eyes, let his familiar ginger and sandalwood scents fill my senses and just breathe him in. It feels like coming home.

I don't know how long we stand like this, long enough for the others to drift away and give us a little privacy. Eventually, he murmurs, "You doing okay?"

I think of all the things I can answer to that question, all the feelings swimming in my eyes. Of how he pushed me to ask questions but also stood back and let me take my time to get here. Of how he knew I would eventually find a way to ask. And so—he waited for me. Like he's waiting for me now.

In the end, I say the only thing that I can. "Thank you."

He squeezes me against his chest again, crushes me against his warmth, and I know he heard everything I didn't say. He always does.

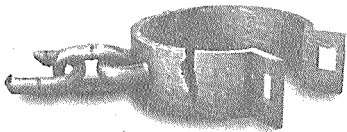
After a moment, he drops a soft kiss on the top of my head before leaning back and saying, "Not that I'm complaining about having you in my arms or anything, but if I'm not mistaken, your cousin is about to do something seriously badass. Or maim us all."

I pull away and follow where he's looking...and my eyes go wide. Holy hell. My cousin is testing the weight of four unbelievably large athames in her hand, bouncing them up and down like she's about to throw—

"Oh my God!"



## A Cut Above the Rest



I gasp as she tosses the blades into the air as hard as she can.

We all look up in alarm, getting ready to dodge, but instead of falling back down and impaling one of us, they flatten out before arranging themselves into a kind of compass formation.

Hudson and I walk over to the clearing and marvel at the floating knives.

We wait for them to do something, anything, but for long seconds they just hang there—hilts facing inward, blades facing outward—and point to what I can only assume is north, south, east, and west.

“So what goes up *doesn’t* come down?” Flint whispers loudly after the seconds stretch into first one minute and then another.

“Shhhh,” Macy tells him as she lifts her wand above her head and starts swirling it around in a circle. “Gwen says the giants are constantly moving the entrance, and the entire city is protected by confusion spells so stray human hikers don’t wander in. Gimme a minute to locate it.”

Seconds later, the athames start to spin in a circle, too, faster and faster until they are whirling above our heads so quickly that it’s nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. Until, all of a sudden, one starts to glow so brightly that it almost looks like it’s on fire.

The brighter it glows, the faster and jerkier Macy’s movements become, until the other three knives drop like stones to the ground—amid yelps from the rest of us.

We barely have a chance to register what just happened before the fourth athame—which is glowing so brightly now that it’s hard to look at—takes off, flying due south right into a huge clump of trees.

“Let’s go!” Macy shouts excitedly.

I’m still a tiny bit shaken by the very close call I just had with an athame, but in the end I suck it up. This is what we’re here for, right?

The others are already racing after Macy, so I join the chase with Hudson hot on my heels. I smile at him—then deliberately knock my shoulder into his. And because he's a vampire and more than capable of holding his own, I put just a bit of stone into it.

He shoots me an inscrutable look as he takes the hit, then speeds up a little. It makes me grin, because this is his version of my shoulder check. Hudson would never hit me even in jest, but he will challenge me. A lot.

Good thing that's the way I like it.

I increase my speed to match his, and then we're racing through the forest, getting into denser and denser populations of trees, skipping over creeks and jumping over narrow ravines.

It's more fun than I ever would have expected.

I can hear the others up ahead—Macy and Eden in the lead, with the guys right behind them. Flint is closest to us, whooping and hollering as we all wind our way through this forest that already feels a little magical, even without the giants.

We jump over another creek—this one complete with tiny frogs hopping along its banks—when Hudson cuts to the right and starts to pull ahead of me. Determined not to let him get any advantage, I use my power to channel the water and smack him right in the face with a giant ball of it—including a couple of frogs.

He looks so shocked that I crack up, then take the tiny advantage granted to me by his surprise and run for the tree cover as fast as I possibly can.

He catches up with me quickly—big surprise—but I zig when he zags and dart right when he darts left. And while there's no water for me to throw up at him this time, the move still surprises a growl out of him, which then surprises a laugh out of me.

I'm smart enough to know he's coming for me now, so I reach for the platinum string inside me. Moments later, my wings are out, and I fly straight up and over him.

I can see the others from up here, and they're still hot on the trail of the athame. It's moving fast, so Jaxon and Mekhi have moved up in front and Eden and Macy can drop back a little without worrying about losing sight of the knife. I'm at the very tops of the trees, but we're moving into denser, taller forest, so I start to fly up a little higher to get a look at the land out in front of us—and to make sure I don't hit any branches.

But before I can do much more than think about it, Hudson jumps straight through the tree branches to catch me.

I shriek a little as his arms come around me, but he just laughs and whispers, “Gotcha.”

I start to laugh with him, but the sound sticks in my throat along with the breath I just took, because what started out as good-natured fun has turned into something completely different.

My wings made it impossible for him to grab me from the back, so we’re face-to-face, his mouth inches from mine and the front of his body pressed flush against the front of mine as he holds on to me. It feels good, really good, to be held by him like this, especially when the look on his face says he feels the same way.

And when he leans in, adjusting his grip so that it feels more like he’s holding me than simply holding on to me, heat explodes between us. My heart kicks up triple time, and whatever air I’ve managed to pull into my body leaves in a rush.

For a second, just a second, I think about winding myself around him, arms circling his shoulders, legs at his hips. But then I remember where we are...and who is right below us.

He smiles even as he pulls back from me and whispers, “See you on the ground.”

Then he just lets go and falls straight through the treetops back to earth.

I hold my breath until I see him land safely in a crouch, before he takes off running through the trees again. I start to drop lower, planning on landing a little bit ahead of where he is so we can run together again. But then I look out over the world in front of me and am transfixed by what I see.

Trees in all directions, lush and green and majestic. It’s one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen.

I’ve always considered myself an ocean girl—growing up on San Diego’s beautiful beaches will do that to a person—but this? This is breathtaking in a totally different way than the mountains of Alaska are.

I take a few spins, do a few loop-de-loops as I revel in the view—and that I’m not freezing my butt off for the first time in what feels like forever.

Down below me, there’s lush greenery as far as the eye can see, from mossy trails to tangled undergrowth to towering pines and redwoods that have been here for centuries. We’re not so far inland yet that I can’t see the

Pacific Ocean to my right, but that only makes the whole experience feel more surreal.

Redwoods and the ocean and the big, beautiful sun shining so brightly over it all—after the freezing temperatures of the last several months of my life, this feels like paradise. It's still cold, of course, but not Alaskan winter cold. And that makes me feel at home for the first time in a very long time.

I totally understand why the giants picked this area in which to settle. If I had a choice, I think I'd settle here, too.

But I can't stay up here forever, no matter how tempting the view. We have a lot to accomplish and only a couple of days to do it in.

I land next to Hudson, who grins at me. "Took you long enough."

"Did you see the view up there?" I ask. "It's gorgeous."

"Yeah," he tells me softly. "It is."

There's something in his voice that tells me he's not talking about the view, and that makes me feel all kinds of things again. Instead of leaning into them the way I want to—this isn't the time or the place—I run faster. And revel in the way Hudson stays beside me the whole time.

I'm beginning to think we're going to run forever, which really isn't okay with me, no matter how good the view, when Jaxon shouts something from in front of us.

I can't hear what it is, but it sounds urgent, so we all lay on the speed. And break through the tree line just in time to see the athame embed itself into the trunk of what has to be the largest tree in the world.



Directly in front of us is the most beautiful grouping of sequoia redwoods that I have ever seen—and that’s saying something, considering when I was ten, my parents took me to Muir Woods as part of our Northern California vacation, and I became obsessed with the redwood trees there. We ended up spending half of our ten-day vacation wandering through forests of giant sequoias and coastal redwoods, just because I couldn’t get enough of them.

Because these trees we are standing in front of now are beautiful, perfect, *amazing*. All those years ago, I felt the magic in the Muir Woods redwoods. I remember standing among these majestic trees and spinning around and around, giggling with sheer joy, wildflowers of every imaginable color stretching up to tickle my outstretched arms.

I remember I never wanted to leave and begged my parents for us to stay forever.

They refused, of course—my parents’ jobs and our life was in San Diego—but I still remember how bitterly disappointed I was. How I couldn’t understand why they would choose not to feel this kind of magic every second of every day if they could.

But what I felt then is *nothing* compared to what I feel standing here now. The trees are all but glittering with the magic sparking off them, and I feel honored, overwhelmed, insignificant to be before them.

I walk up to the giant tree and pull the athame from its trunk, and I swear I hear it groan. I hand the knife to Macy and then lean forward and place both my hands on the tree’s massive trunk. I rest my cheek against its rough bark, close my eyes, and feel the soft earth beneath my feet. I draw its magic up my body and then channel it out of my hands and straight into the tree.

Instantly, I feel an answering magic from the tree skim through my body

and back out my feet and into the earth around me. An infinite loop of energy, of nature, and I'm a part of it, breathing with it and humbled by it.

After a moment, I step away from the tree and turn to face my friends. We still have to find the entrance to the city.

But they're all staring at me, jaws slack and wonderment in their eyes. Even Jaxon looks stunned.

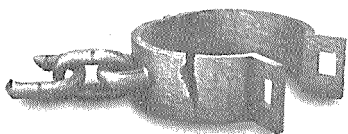
"What—" I ask, looking around, then freeze as I realize—I'm surrounded by wildflowers where there were none a minute before, huge and tall and every imaginable color.

And the giant sequoia no longer has a gash where the athame lodged itself.

Hudson steps forward and snaps one of the flowers about three inches down its stalk, then pushes the brilliant blue flower's stem behind my ear. "You are amazing."

I duck my head as heat blooms in my cheeks, but Flint's shout of surprise snaps my head back up.

And now I'm the one standing, openmouthed in wonderment, as Giant City is finally revealed.



## Bright Lights, Biggest City

I blink several times, just to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me. Because the wall of thick sequoias is gone now—as if they were just a magical wall hiding what lay beyond. And what has taken their place is... beyond description. I don't know where to look first, my gaze darting from structure to structure, some high in the trees, others almost hidden between massive tree trunks, and all of it bustling with giants.

Standing right in front of us, tucked up against the base of the first redwood, is what looks to be a guardhouse, just big enough for a giant or two.

Even more astonishing is what's going on behind the guardhouse—a busy, bustling town filled with giants, all of whom are going about their lives with absolutely no idea we exist, let alone that we are watching them.

"This is incredible," Luca whispers, walking closer to get a better view.

"Totally incredible," Macy echoes as she, too, moves closer. "And oh my gosh! There's another building!" she squeals. "It's huge, but you can barely see it because of the way it's designed. This is..."

"Magical," I tell her, stepping around Flint and Jaxon so I can see what she's seeing. "Oh, wow. It *is* huge."

The building she's talking about is hidden between three of the larger trees, so they give it incredible cover. The base of each tree has to be close to thirty feet wide, and I can't even begin to guess how tall each of them is, considering all I see when I look up is more tree.

The building, which is made from gorgeously polished wood, is probably close to fifty feet tall on its own, but it's dwarfed by the trees surrounding it on all sides.

"The design of the wood alone is incredible," Macy comments as we get closer. "How does anyone design a building to look like that?"

"I think it's kind of plain," Flint says.

"Plain? Are you kidding me?" I gasp. "It's gorgeous."

"Okay." He shrugs in an everyone's-allowed-their-own-opinion kind of way, but then I realize he's not looking at the same trees Macy and I are looking at. He's staring several feet to the left of us—which I don't understand, because there's nothing there.

"I don't think it's that big," Eden agrees with him. "It's cool the way they've done it, but—"

"Wait a minute. That's an entirely different building!" I exclaim, finally able to see what they're talking about now that I've walked closer to them.

And they're right. It is plain...and small. A little dollhouse of a building completely encapsulated by the ring of giant trees that surrounds it. They're a lot thinner—and obviously younger—than the ones I was looking at earlier, but the tiny building fits beautifully within them.

I move even closer to get a better look, then turn back to say something to Macy, only to realize that the building she and I were staring at just a few moments ago is gone. It's completely vanished.

"Oh my God." I know what's going on here. "You can't see it."

Flint looks at me like I'm very, very confused. "Sure I can. It's right there."

"No!" I grab his arm and start tugging him to where Macy is standing as I wave the others over.

"Holy shit!" Flint exclaims. "Where did that come from?"

"What do you mean?" Macy asks. "It's been here all along."

"No," Jaxon starts. "It wasn't—"

"Yes," I tell him excitedly. "It was."

I look around, trying to spot more buildings, but I can't see any others from where I'm standing. Except the giants are obviously coming in and out of somewhere, so the buildings must be here, hidden among the trees, like these two are.

"I've heard of this before," I tell them. "When I was thinking of going to UC Santa Cruz for college." It seems like a million years ago instead of months. "When we went to visit, they made a huge deal of talking about the architecture and how the whole campus is designed so that you can only see two buildings at any one time, so as not to mess with the landscape. They have redwoods, too."

And, admittedly, their architecture is a lot more utilitarian than these whimsical buildings, but the environmentalism behind the design is the same.



I'd fallen in love with the campus all those months ago, and now I've fallen in love with this Giant City just as completely.

"It's the sickest thing I've ever seen," Luca says as he paces from one edge of the clearing to the other. "Do you think the whole city's like that?"

"I would bet on it." Hudson walks a little more to the right and points out a third building none of us had noticed yet. It's a candy shop, I think, judging from the different-colored jelly beans painted on the roof. "This is all too carefully done for it to just be a whim."

"Yeah," I agree, tilting my head back as far as I can in an effort to see to the tops of the nearby trees.

"This is where the fairy tale really comes from," Hudson says, lightly resting a hand on my lower back as he, too, looks up.

"Oh my God, you're right. Not beanstalks. Redwoods."

He grins. "Exactly."

"Wait a minute." I narrow my eyes at him. "You said you didn't know that story when I mentioned it in my room."

He holds my gaze for a second, then deliberately glances away. "I looked it up afterward."

"You did? Really?"

He shrugs. "It seemed important to you."

"Not important, just..." I blow out a breath, then let it drop. Because what I want to say is that his parents suck. That it's not fair that he doesn't know something as simple as *Jack and the Beanstalk* because his parents are selfish assholes who probably never read him a bedtime story in his life. That tutors are great for the brain but maybe not so great for everything else.

Between Cyrus trying to get him to use his power to destroy his enemies and Delilah ignoring him unless she needed him to be an accessory, Hudson's childhood was a nightmare. He never uses it as an excuse, though. Never even talks about it at all, unless I ask him a direct question. But he thought the story meant something to me, so he made the time to read it.

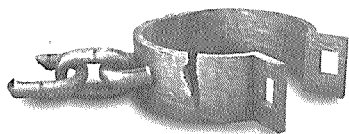
I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that, except lean in to his side and lace our fingers together as I whisper, "Thank you."

At first he seems startled, and I think he's going to pull away. But then he sighs, and I feel his body relaxing—slowly, slowly, slowly—against mine. "You're welcome," he tells me, and his accent is super pronounced. "Now if only we can figure out why those pesky magic beans got added to the story."

“Only one way to find out,” I say with a laugh.

He lifts a brow. “And how is that exactly?”

I look around at my friends, all of whom look as in awe of this city as I am. “We ask someone,” I answer as I tug his hand and head straight for the guardhouse.



## Knock-Knock, Who's There?

“I thought they couldn’t see us,” Eden says as she follows close on my heels. “Seems like a terrible defense, that we can see them and they can’t see us,” Flint adds, and I have to admit that I agree.

We approach the guardhouse gingerly, not because we’re afraid so much as because we don’t want to startle the guards.

Except as we move to walk up to the guardhouse’s front window, it becomes apparent that they absolutely know we’re here, even if they haven’t said anything to us before now. The massive slingshot one of them has aimed directly at us—loaded with a boulder almost as big as I am—says that much. As does the sword the other has drawn.

“Who are you?” one of them demands in a voice so loud, it shakes the ground around us.

He’s much taller (like five feet taller) and larger than Mr. Damasén—they both are—and has a bushy brown beard; a wide, burly chest covered by a black uniform shirt; and the most suspicious blue eyes I have ever run across—which is saying something, considering I’m mated to Hudson Vega. Suspicion is basically his first, last, and middle name.

“What is your business at the Firmament?” asks the second, who is smaller than the first but only by a little, which is to say that he only towers over me by about six feet.

He’s also younger-looking, though I don’t know if it’s because he’s actually younger or if it’s because he doesn’t have a beard covering two thirds of his face. His eyes are the same strange gold as Mr. Damasén’s, but he wears his dark-blond hair pulled back in a man bun, and black tattoos decorate his forearms below the rolled-up sleeves of his uniform.

He’s no less dangerous-looking, though, thanks to the giant saber he has braced over his shoulder.

"The Firmament?" I ask. "Is that the name of your city?"

His eyes narrow dangerously. "State your business with us or be on your way."

"We have no official business—"

"Then hit the forest," says the bearded one. "We have no use for a band of lost Lilliputians, even if you be a wee bit magical."

My eyes widen at the familiar term for the tiny, arrogant people in *Gulliver's Travels*.

"You know what we are?" Eden asks, her own face as suspicious as the giants'.

"I can smell ye, can't I?" interjects the blond one. "Now go, before we decide to call pest control to exterminate ye."

All right, so maybe walking right up and trying to talk to them without a cover story in place wasn't a great plan, but to be fair, what kind of cover story were we supposed to come up with?

We were lost and our magic just happened to expose your city?

We want to join the Firmament?

We fell down a rabbit hole with four vampires, two dragons, a witch, and a gargoyle? Sounds like the start to a very bad joke.

"We don't plan to stay long," Macy says sweetly. "We're looking for someone, and we were hoping one of you might be able to help us out."

"You want to find a giant?" Brown Beard says. "I don't think so. Now walk away, or I'll *make* you walk away."

I can feel Flint tensing next to me, can sense the way Jaxon is shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet, and I'm really worried this is about to go south fast. And then we'll be totally screwed, as this lead, unhelpful as it appears, is the only one we've currently got.

I'm pretty sure Hudson feels the same way, because he shifts so that he's directly in front of both Jaxon and Flint, even as he says, "Actually, we were trying to keep a low profile, as we're traveling in such a small group, but several of us are representatives from the Indigo Circle." He gestures to Flint, Jaxon, and myself. "Four of us are members of the ruling families, and we were hoping to pay our respects to the Colossor and Colossa while we are in the area."

If possible, Brown Beard's eyes narrow even more. "We weren't informed of any royal visit."

"It was an impromptu trip," I jump in hastily. "But when we found ourselves on your borders, it felt churlish not to stop and pay our respects to your own ruling family."

Mekhi chokes a little bit at my use of "churlish"—and yes, I admit it's a bit historical and over-the-top—but everything about these guys screams over-the-top. I feel like leaning into it is the way to go. And if it's not...well, they weren't going to let us in anyway, so no harm, no foul.

Both of the giants continue to look suspicious, but they also look concerned now, like they're afraid of the consequences of turning away members of other paranormal royal families without at least a consult with someone on their rulers' staffs.

Talk about a good call on Hudson's part. Using royal credentials to get in when we're actually here in search of a way to bring *down* the vampire king is more than a little ironic, but who am I to judge? At this point, I'm very much a whatever-works/any-port-in-a-storm kind of girl.

Besides, it's not like we're lying. We are who we say we are, and we mean absolutely no harm to the giants or anyone else...well, besides Cyrus.

And maybe Cole, the jerk. I wouldn't mind hurting him a little.

After demanding our names, Blond Man Bun orders us to "Wait right here," as he and Brown Beard move to the back of the guardhouse to try to decide what to do with us. The funny part is that they try to whisper, but their voice boxes aren't exactly cut out for that, so we hear everything they say—including the part about throwing us in the oubliette if they have to.

I have no idea what an oubliette is, but judging from the delight on their faces when they say it, I can't help thinking it has something to do with a jail cell...or worse, a dungeon. Which is not how I was hoping this would go.

To be fair, I never anticipated that there would be a guardhouse at all. I'm not sure what I thought, but whatever it was, it focused on convincing people to talk to us rather than trying to avoid a dungeon—excuse me, an oubliette—in our first ten minutes in the city.

We wait as phone calls are made, another discussion is had, more phone calls are made. The others are getting impatient—which doesn't exactly surprise me in regards to Flint or Eden, because if Katmere has taught me anything, it's that dragons shoot fire first and ask questions later.

But even Mekhi, Luca, and Macy are looking like they want to make a break for it. Jaxon looks ready to level the entire city at the first inkling

of a threat. Only Hudson and I seem to be out for a casual stroll as we wait.

Eventually, the guards come back to us, and they don't look happy—though I'm not sure what we've done to set them off this time other than simply existing. Not that I'm about to ask.

"We haven't been able to get ahold of the Colossor or Colossa," Brown Beard tells us with a frown, "and their advisers aren't willing to let an unknown paranormal into the Firmament without strict permission."

"Unknown paranormal?" Hudson asks. "We've already identified ourselves—"

"You said you were from the Indigo Circle. That means dragons, wolves, vampires, and witches," Blond Man Bun interjects. "But she"—he glares at me—"is none of those things. So until we know what she is and have permission for her to enter, the whole group of you stays right here."

He starts to shut the window before his words even register, but as a few of us try to get a hand in to hold up the window closing and convince him to change his mind, I hear a tinkling laugh.

And turn to see one of the most gorgeous girls I have ever seen walking toward us. That she is also nearly twelve feet tall despite only being twelve or thirteen years old only makes her beauty more obvious and her excitement inescapable.



“Oh my gosh, it’s true! Vampires here, at the Firmament! I couldn’t believe it when Rygor told me.” She holds out her enormous hands to us. “Come in, come in! It’s been so long since we’ve had visitors. I can’t wait to talk to all of you.”

“Cala Erym.” Brown Beard drops into a deep bow. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think it’s safe for you to meet with these people. They haven’t been cleared by your parents—”

“Give me a break, Baldwin.” She rolls her bright-purple eyes at him even as her sleek black ponytail shakes back and forth. “I don’t think the Vampire Court is here to assassinate us. And if they were, they wouldn’t announce their presence by showing up at the guardhouse first.”

She turns to us. “I’m Erym, cala of the Giant Court. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you.” Hudson steps forward with a practiced smile that is as unexpected as it is impressive and introduces himself. This is Hudson the diplomat, I realize as I watch him chat easily with Erym. This is the vampire raised at court who I’ve heard about but who I’ve never really seen before.

Flint steps forward, too, and does a half bow that is both rakish and charming as he takes Erym’s hand, which is about twice the size of his. “I’m Flint Montgomery, first prince of the Dragon Court. It’s good to meet you, Cala Erym.”

She giggles, then gives him a half-curtsy back. “It’s good to meet you, too, Prince Flint. Dragons have always been my favorite.”

“And giants have always been mine,” he answers with a wink.

She giggles again, maybe even blushes a little, and Luca chuckles behind me. I glance at him to see what he thinks is so funny, but he’s smiling indulgently at Flint. When he catches me looking at him, he gives a tiny eye roll and a shrug. It’s totally his *Isn’t Flint the most adorable thing in the entire world* look, and he’s so right that I can’t help grinning back at him.

After Flint is done charming Erym, Jaxon moves forward and introduces himself to her as well. He's not flirtatious like Flint or smooth like Hudson, but that doesn't seem to matter to Erym, whose eyes light up the second his palm touches hers.

Behind me, Mekhi snickers just a little, because it's so obvious that she's about to have a giant-size crush on Jaxon, and I elbow him softly in the ribs. Partly because it's rude and partly because I know exactly how Erym feels. It wasn't that long ago that I was falling for Jaxon nearly as fast.

Erym greets the others with a gracious smile, but when I step forward to introduce myself, she claps enthusiastically. "Oh my gosh! You're the gargoyle we've all heard so much about! Welcome, Grace! Welcome!"

And then she picks me up like I'm a rag doll and gives me a giant-size hug.

"It's so exciting to finally meet you!" she says, even as she shakes me around like I'm a favorite pet. "And to think you're really here, at the Firmament! I can't wait to introduce you to Xeno! He's always trying to leave because he says nothing exciting ever happens here, but look—" She gently sets me back down on the ground. "Look at all the fascinating people who have come to see us!"

I'm a little overwhelmed from having just been picked up and patted on the head like a puppy, but she's so sweetly innocent that it's impossible for me to be annoyed with her. A quick look around tells me everyone else is having the exact same reaction.

"Well, come on!" she says, waving an arm for us to follow her as she starts half walking, half skipping back into town. "I can't wait to show you *everything*!"

Blond Man Bun moves in to try to stop her one last time, but she just waves him away with a, "Stop worrying, Vikra! We'll be fine." She looks over at us. "Right, guys?"

We all nod enthusiastically, because what else are we supposed to do? Also, it's pretty obvious none of us wants to disappoint her.

"What do you want to see first?" she asks as she starts leading us through the center of town.

"Whatever you'd like to show us," Flint answers. "We've never been to the Firmament before, but it looks absolutely amazing."

She shrugs. "I don't know about amazing, but there are a bunch of fun things to do. And I instructed Rygor to prepare a banquet in your honor for tonight. Mama and Papa will be home by then, and they will be as excited



to meet you as I am.”

“Is there a hotel or an inn we can check into for the night?” Hudson asks as we wind our way through several small groupings of trees, each with some kind of house or building secure inside it.

“You don’t actually think I’m going to let you stay in a hotel, do you, silly?” She gives him a light pat on the shoulder that nearly sends him flying. “You’ll stay with us, of course.”

“We wouldn’t want to impose,” Flint tries, but Erym just shakes her head.

“It’s no imposition. We have plenty of room.” She rubs her hands together. “Now, what do you say I give you a tour of the Firmament, and we can all have some fun along the way?”

It’s not quite the investigation we had in mind for our first day here, but her enthusiasm is infectious. Besides, when will we ever have another chance to explore a city made by giants?

“I say, what’s first? I’ve heard your Gorbenschlam Challenge is an experience not to be missed,” Mekhi tells her with a grin, then winks at Macy.

“That’s the spirit!” She holds up a hand for a fist bump, and Mekhi doesn’t leave her hanging. But he does brace himself first—a lot—and she still manages to push him back a foot or three.

I can’t help laughing, because walking through this beautiful city with Erym, surrounded by my friends and the most magical trees in existence, is the most fun I’ve had in a very long time. After months of feeling scared and sad and sometimes even downright awful, it’s like I can finally breathe again.

Everywhere we go, giants stop to stare at us. Some are bold enough to come up and ask Cala Erym to introduce them, while others just watch or wave from afar. It feels strange being the center of attention like this, but then I try to imagine what it would be like at Katmere if eight giants just started walking through the halls. I’m pretty sure there would be a lot of staring then as well.

One of the first things I notice is that there are no vehicles of any sort in the Firmament. Everyone gets around on foot or on giant tricycles that are definitely bigger than we are. It seems odd that there is no other transportation here, but area wise, it’s really not that big of a town, since they make the best use of the vertical space as well. Besides, when you’re between ten and twenty feet tall, I’m guessing you can walk pretty fast when you want to.

“Let’s go this way!” Erym says as she herds us around a redwood with a base that has to have a circumference of close to ninety feet. The thing is

massive, and unlike so many of the other trees, it doesn't have a building nestled between it and some of the surrounding trees. Instead, down near the bottom, the trunk has been partially hollowed out so that people can actually walk straight inside the tree.

Above the twenty-foot triangular-shaped door is a sign that reads, GIANT CAULDRONS.

"Oh my God!" Macy shouts as understanding dawns. "All this time, I thought they were called 'giant cauldrons' because they're so huge! Seriously, you can easily fit three people into some of the bigger ones. But really they're *giant* cauldrons?" Macy asks, her voice dripping in awe as she moves closer to the tree door. "You make *witch's cauldrons*?"

"Of course." Erym grins indulgently. "Giants are the best metalworkers in the world because we can easily manipulate earth magic into everything we create. Come on. I'll see if I can talk Sumna into letting you observe the process."

She says the last part extra loud, even as she bats her big purple eyes at the older woman behind the very high counter near the entrance to the tree. She's got long brown hair, which she wears in a single braid down her back, and though her face is serious, her bright mocha-colored eyes are awash with mischief as she winks at Erym.

"Are you sure you want to give away all our secrets?" she asks, but she smiles at Erym before moving over to an area about thirty feet behind her where an easily ten-foot giant is working at a massive wooden bench. Behind him is a roaring fire in a pot-bellied stove. So strange that we couldn't feel the fire until we got closer, but I suppose if you're going to build a fire *inside* a tree, you need to protect it with serious magic.

His beefy hands are encased in orange leather gloves, his face covered by an apparatus similar to a welder's mask. Large metal tongs are clipped onto the side of a metal bowl, and he uses them to turn the bowl this way and that as he presses a long metal rod with a bright-orange metal ball on the end along the inside of the bowl, only pausing every few minutes to drop the cooled ball into the fire to reheat it before starting again.

The whole process doesn't look anything more special than how I'd imagine you'd make a cauldron, if I'd ever bothered to consider it before today, that is. But then the giant places the long metal rod with the ball back into the fire, lifts his mask, and then leans forward and whispers along the side of the cauldron, slowly turning it into his breath.

Runes of various shapes and sizes start to appear all over the outside of the cauldron, everywhere his breath meets the cooling metal. They flame a bright orange like the fire before fading to red and eventually disappear into the black metal as they cool.

"Are those magical runes?" Macy all but squeals, her eyes glued to the fading symbols.

"They are indeed," Sumna tells her, and this time she doesn't even bother to hide her smile. "Each cauldron is blessed with a special type of magic, depending on what the blacksmith's purpose in each creation is. Some cauldrons are meant to create healing spells, others to bring harmony and balance, and there are even those for war."

"I'd heard that, but I had no idea this is how you did it!" Macy grins at me. "My dad is going to *die* that I got to see how our cauldron was made."

A quick look at Flint and Eden and the vampires tells me they are just as fascinated by the entire process as Macy.

Macy's eyebrows hit her hairline as she gasps. "Does this mean each blacksmith has their own talent, their own spells, and that's what an Amweldonlis Cauldron is—it was made by the giant named Amweldonlis?"

Sumna's smile is as big as her face now. "Close. The first part is the blacksmith's name and the second is the name of the tree it was crafted within. An Amweldonlis Cauldron was made by Amweld in the Onlis tree."

She points to one of the giant redwoods not far from her shop. "Like, that's the Falgron tree. It helps infuse spells with strength and goodness. Which is why it's my favorite tree." She smiles at Macy. "And that is why the cauldron your family uses is a Sumnafalgron."

Macy's mouth drops open "How did you—"

"I know where all my cauldrons go, sweetheart. They are very near and dear to my heart, and I want to ensure they have a happy home. Your father is a very good man. I was honored for him to use one of my cauldrons."

"I can't—" Macy's voice breaks, and tears bloom in her eyes.

Eden wraps an arm around her and whispers, "Coolest thing ever, huh?"

My cousin nods. "The coolest."

"You see," Sumna continues, "the trees in the Firmament speak to us. They offer us their magic, to build our houses and our shops. We always use them for making our cauldrons, or really any of our metalwork. The tree's own magic where the metal was crafted brings something special to the item

as well as the blacksmith. In fact, the tree's magic is so important, blacksmiths have been known to seek out a specific tree for a particular commission."

She puts a hand to one side of her mouth and leans toward us, as though she's about to share a trade secret she doesn't want anyone else to overhear. "I'm especially partial to jewelry made within the Manwa tree." Her eyes are positively twinkling now. "That tree is known to give the wearer a special glamour of beauty."

Macy glances at Eden with an awed look on her face, motions with one hand that her mind is blown, and Eden laughs.

And I have to say, it's all really, really cool. I'm so intrigued, I'd forgotten why we came until Hudson nudges me with his elbow. Sumna is suggesting Erym take the group over to another giant just starting his cauldron process, a hunk of metal six feet tall resting on his workbench.

Sumna starts to head back to her position at the front of the tree, and Hudson follows her.

"Excuse me, Sumna?" Hudson calls out, smooth as butter, and she stops and turns with a smile. "I'm sorry to bother you. But I was wondering if you have a blacksmith in town who makes magical cuffs?"

Sumna winks at him. "Honey, half the city are blacksmiths. And all of them dabble in crafting jewelry as well as cauldrons. What are you in need of?"

My stomach sinks. We'd just assumed the Blacksmith was his name, like with a capital B. How foolish I feel now as I realize that's not his name at all; it's just his profession. The Bloodletter told us to find the blacksmith who made the cuff—not *the Blacksmith*.

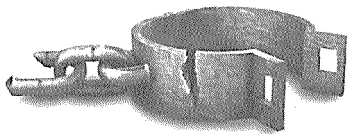
I turn to Hudson, my eyes asking how in the world we can find a man whose name we don't know in a city where half its inhabitants are similarly employed. He just winks at me and turns back to Sumna.

"Can you help me out, then? There's this girl I want to impress, but I kind of screwed up," he lies smoothly. "I got into some trouble at school, and now I'm grounded for a few weeks." He lifts his wrist to show her his cuff. "But if I don't get this cuff off, I'm not going to stand a chance. How can I convince her I'm the guy for her if I'm just a regular old vamp?"

Sumna studies the cuff for a second, then shakes her head and frowns. "I'm so sorry, son, but the blacksmith who made these original cuffs hasn't been seen in centuries."

Which is the last thing any of us wants to hear.

## A Giant Little Crush



My shoulders sag. How are we ever going to free the Unkillable Beast and find the Crown without the right blacksmith? And if we don't find the Crown, how are we going to save Hudson from prison? Stop Cyrus from attacking Katmere?

But Hudson is determined. He turns up the charm and gives the giant a wink. "Now, come on, Sumna. I really love this girl. There's gotta be something I can do, someone who can help me."

Sumna holds his gaze for a beat before she chuckles. "Oh, I remember young love. So foolhardy and exciting." She pauses to look around for the others at the opposite end of the factory, then leans in to Hudson and whispers conspiratorially, "I hear his wife still does some repairs on his old work. She might be willing to help you. Maybe. She's not been the same since her husband left, but she's got a soft spot for young love. If she's working, it'll be in the Soli tree."

Hudson positively beams at her. "I won't forget this, Sumna! If you're ever in the Vampire Court, I'd be honored to show you around."

The older woman blushes like a schoolgirl as she swats him away. "Oh, you are a handful, aren't you?" Her eyes turn to mine. "Is this your girl?"

Hudson doesn't hesitate. "Yes, ma'am."

She studies me, her eyes going wide for a second before the brown orbs twinkle devilishly. "Yes, I can see why you want to impress this young lady. She's positively radiant with magic. It'll take a lot for you to keep up with her."

"You have no idea," Hudson agrees, his steady gaze holding mine. "But I'll spend the rest of my life trying."

Is this just part of his act, I wonder, or does he really mean what he's saying? It's probably the former, but that doesn't stop the heat from warming my cheeks or my heart from pounding fast and hard in my chest.

"I think he does pretty well," I tell her. "I'm still getting a handle on my gargoyle magic."

And then the old woman does something completely startling. She sniffs me. "Yes, I definitely smell the gargoyle in you, but..." She sniffs again. "I was referring to something else. Something much more ancient. What were your parents?"

I'm so surprised by her question, I answer without thinking. "My father was a warlock, but my mother was just a human."

Her eyes narrow. "Hmm. Was she now?" A few seconds pass, but then her features soften again, and she laughs. "Look at me, being fanciful. Now, go on, you two, get that cuff off, and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She's still laughing to herself about that last comment as she walks away, and I stare at Hudson and mouth, *What the hell?*

He shrugs. "Giants."

I want to ask him what he thinks she meant, but Erym and the rest of our group are done with the other demonstration and join us again.

"Come on, you guys. I have so much more to show you." Erym ushers us around a corner and down a quiet street filled with little clumps of trees, each with its very own house inside it.

*The Firmament's suburbs?* I wonder as she rushes us past. *Or downtown condos?*

"You came on the best day of the week," she explains as we turn another corner, this time onto a street that's got a lot more buzz going on as people move back and forth between shops, carrying bags of everything from bread to books. "It's Market Day!"

"Market Day?" Eden asks as we wind our way down the lightly crowded street. "Do you mean like a farmers' market?"

When Erym gives her a blank look, she clarifies, "A market where you can get fresh food?"

"It's a market where you can get anything and everything," Erym answers as she herds us around one more corner.

And as I look at the gorgeous, colorful melee spilling out in all directions in front of us, I can't help but think that she's right. This market has everything.

We're obviously in the town square, or the closest thing to it that the Firmament has. Though a large, square-like area is outlined in redwoods, the whole center is completely clear. It's the most land I've seen without trees

since we arrived in this area several hours ago, and it's filled to the brim with huge, colorful tents in shades of red, blue, and green.

Giants are wandering from tent to tent, large canvas bags in their hands as they scoop up one treasure or another. The air is redolent with the scents of fresh bread and beer and flowers, and it should be a nauseating combination, but it actually smells really good. Especially when you add the scent of buttered popcorn currently floating through the air and overlaying everything.

As we get closer, I can see inside the tents and what they're selling—everything from the aforementioned flowers to bubble bath to shoes I could hide in to cupcakes the size of a giant's fist (which in our world would simply be called triple-layer cakes). Artists and artisans are hawking their wares—paintings the size of my bedroom wall, gorgeous wooden furniture so tall that I can't see the tops of some of it, necklaces that look like belts.

It's the most fantastic thing I've ever seen.

My parents and I used to wander through craft fairs and farmers' markets all the time in San Diego, but none of them was this spectacular. And none of them had a party vibe like this one, with food that smells so amazing, my mouth is actually watering.

"Where do you want to start?" Macy asks, and she looks as excited as I feel.

But Hudson quickly jumps in. "Erym, do you know where I could find the Soli tree? I hear the blacksmiths there make the best jewelry."

Erym claps her hands. "Oh, they do, although you better be sure you really love your girl before you buy something for her there." She tosses me a wink. "The Soli tree lends immortal magic to its creations. Jewelry from this tree is the most sought-after in the whole world."

I swallow the lump in my throat that forms at the word "immortal." Would the tree's immortality make the beast's cuffs unbreakable? Hudson seems unfazed by this news and reaches down to hold my hand, tossing me a wicked grin before replying, "Oh, I think this one might be a keeper."

The giant laughs and gives Hudson directions to the tree, which is at the other end of the market area. Hudson nods and catches Jaxon's eye, some sort of silent communication passing between the two of them. They must reach an agreement, though, because Jaxon coughs and turns to Erym.

"I think perhaps we should split up," Jaxon suggests. "It'll help us get through more booths quicker."

Erym squeals and says, "That's a great idea!" She grabs on to Jaxon's



hand. “*You* come with me. We’ll meet the others back here in two hours.”

She doesn’t even wait to see if we agree with her suggestion, just starts hustling him toward the nearest tent. Jaxon, in the meantime, is throwing out every kind of *help me* vibe and expression he can, but I just smile and wave. Maybe we should be ashamed of ourselves—it’s obvious that Erym has a gigantic crush on him—but the truth is, the panic on his face is the most emotion I’ve seen from him in days. Negotiating her hero worship without hurting her feelings will be good for him.

The others must feel the same way, because they don’t make a move to help him, either. Except Macy who, when Jaxon gives us what can only be called a pleading expression, finally gives in. “I’ll go with them,” she says on a sigh. “Jaxon looks like he needs all the help he can get.”

“That’s the whole point,” Mekhi tells her with a grin, but she just rolls her eyes and heads after them, shouting for the lovebirds to “hold on.”

The rest of us divide up, too. Flint goes with Luca (of course), while Eden and Mekhi wander off to look at a display of giant weapons in a nearby tent. Which leaves Hudson and me.

“Shall we go find this Soli tree?” he asks, brows raised, when I just kind of stand on the grass staring at him instead of following the others.

My stomach flips a little at the British in his voice—I’ve learned that the heavier his accent, the more he’s feeling, even if his blue eyes don’t show any of it—and I have to clear my throat before answering, “Yeah, let’s go.”

For a second, I think Hudson is going to say something else, but in the end, he just nods and starts off in the direction Erym gave us. He doesn’t move to release my hand and neither do I, so I have no choice but to keep up with him. He’s leading and I don’t mind following this time, as it gives me a chance to take in all the sights and sounds and smells spilling from the different tents without having to pay attention to where we’re going.

I know we’re in the middle of a forest, but something about this place reminds me of the boardwalk back at home on Saturday afternoons. People in whatever clothes they feel comfortable in, spilling out of stores loaded down with food and packages, laughing and talking and having a great time. It’s colorful and beautiful and so fun that for a second, a jolt of homesickness rocks me to my core.

But then a little girl runs by in a flower crown, laughing as her parents chase after her, and the sadness passes as suddenly as it came.



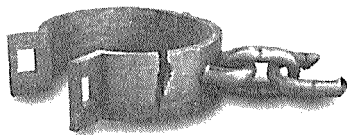
I start looking inside all the tents and am so enthralled by one filled with beautiful leather belts and purses that I don't even realize Hudson has stopped walking until I run right into him. His hand goes around my waist to keep me from stumbling as he grins down at me. "Hey, you."

I blink. "Hey." I'm actually a little surprised I managed to get that word out, since my body is trembling so hard, pressed up against his, my gaze drowning in his deep-blue one.

He raises one brow as if to ask what's up, then adds, "We're here."

"Oh!" I push out of his arms as embarrassment swamps me and I glance around, looking everywhere but at him. He just laughs a little and presses a hand to the small of my back as he guides me to a giant redwood on the outskirts of the market, a huge wooden sign hanging from a branch that proudly proclaims: SOLI TREE.

## When I Asked for a Ring, I Just Meant on the Phone



Hudson and I exchange a look as we push open the door and walk into a massive space. More than half the tree is a jewelry store filled with huge glassed cases with rows and rows of all different kinds of jewelry. Rings, bracelets, earrings, and yes, even cuffs.

The other half of the space is taken up by various giants working at tables, magical kilns running around the edges of the room. My heart is pounding at the thought that the blacksmith's wife might be one of the giants working at a table right now.

"These are beautiful," I tell the girl behind the first counter as I pause to investigate a display case of rings in human sizes.

"Thank you!" she answers, and though she's a few years older than Erym—and probably even me—her smile is just as open and friendly. "I have fun making them."

"I would, too," I tell her as I linger over one that's a flat silver band with delicate symbols etched all the way around. Something about the symbols feels like it's calling to me, and I have to fight the urge to beg to try it on. "They're amazing."

Hudson is walking the aisles, too, but he's more focused on the cases in the back with large bracelets and wrist cuffs. Most are too small to be made by the same blacksmith we're seeking, but they're certainly a good direction to start. "These are really cool," he tells the jeweler, whose name tag identifies her as Olya. "Who makes these?"

"One of the women in town," Olya answers. "She's super talented and can do the most amazing things with any metal she touches."

"Really?" He appears fascinated with a large cuff bracelet, symbols almost dancing around its edges, and my breath catches. The way the runes are etched looks very similar to the ones on the cuff around the beast's ankle.

“Does she take commissions?”

“I don’t think so.” Olya’s face clouds over for a couple of brief seconds. “She doesn’t like to deal with people very much—especially strangers. She’s been very sad since losing her husband, and we’re all just a bit protective of her.”

“Are you sure?” Hudson asks, and he’s doing an incredible job of pretending to be fascinated with that bracelet. “Because this is—”

He stops as I grab his hand and press gently in an effort to get him to back off a little. Olya has started to look uncomfortable, and we don’t want to raise any red flags that will get people to clam up or, worse, tell Erym’s parents about our agenda, which is growing more obvious by the second.

Hudson must get the message, because he stops pushing at her about the jewelry maker and instead comments on the ring I’d been admiring near the front of the shop.

Olya’s smile comes back right away as she regales him with the names of all the different runes etched into the silver. Satisfied that Hudson isn’t going to push too hard, I start to pull my hand from his, but instead he threads our fingers more tightly together, and that stolen moment above the treetops a few hours ago comes rushing back, his arms wrapped around me, his face inches from mine, his voice dark and a little flirtatious as he whispered, “Gotcha.”

A thousand butterflies take flight in my stomach, and I pretend to focus on the ring and not our joined hands, oohing and aahing over it, though only vaguely paying attention to the explanation about the various runes and what they mean.

“Would you like to try it on?” she eventually asks.

“Oh, I would love to,” I tell her honestly. “But I don’t have any money.” It’s not strictly true—I have a couple hundred dollars in my backpack, but that’s American money. I have no idea what giants use.

“I do,” Hudson says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a gold coin with a tree stamped on it.

Olya’s smile beams at the potential sale. “I’ve never met a vampire or a gargoyle before.” She turns back to the ring. “Besides, I can already tell, the ring has chosen you.”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I turn to ask Hudson what she means, but he is full-on grinning at me. The little dimple in his cheek I so rarely see melts my heart, and I am powerless to resist him. I place the hand not caught in

his death grip onto his chest, and my whole body melts into his with a sigh. I study his eyes, fascinated as his pupils grow so large that they swallow almost his entire iris, so that I can only see a rim of stormy blue along the edges. His lips are moving, but the words sound like I'm underwater. And that's when I realize I must have drowned in the endless depths of his oceanic eyes. It seems like a fitting way to die.

Olya pulls the case out of the display, but Hudson beats her to the punch, lifting our joined hands and slipping the ring gently on my finger as he murmurs something on a soft breath. His fingers brush against mine, sending shivers through my whole body as my breath catches in my throat.

Even Olya must sense what's passing between us because she snuffles and says, "That was beautiful."

*It's just the mating bond*, I tell myself as I clear my throat and try to find the breath I somehow lost. That's what's making me feel all these weird things toward Hudson. Just the mating bond.

My finger starts to itch, and I glance down as the tiny runes burn a bright orange for a second before fading back to their previous silver etchings.

My gaze searches out Hudson's again, and he says simply, "My gift to you, Grace."

Hudson bought me a ring? Why? What does this mean? My heart starts to pound in my chest as I become aware of where we are again, like waking up from a cozy nap.

Oh my God. I let Hudson buy me a ring.

He narrows his eyes on me and sighs. "You're about to make a thing about this, aren't you?"

I sputter. "Well, o-of course. You can't just go around buying people magical rings!"

"Well, she found her voice again." He winks at Olya. "I know, honey, what you really wanted was one of those cuffs over there." He dips his head toward the thick bracelets at the back of the store he'd been looking at before.

I want to argue, but he's staring at me hard, and realization dawns on me. "Yes, *honey*, you know I wanted a cuff today." I effect my best imitation of a spoiled girl pouting. "Pleeease?"

Like he's used to my tantrums, he turns pleading eyes on Olya. "If you care about my happiness at all, you will let my mate try on one of those amazing cuffs."

Olya just shakes her head, murmuring something about mates as she walks over to the display case holding the cuff at the back of the store.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

He raises one brow. “Trust me?”

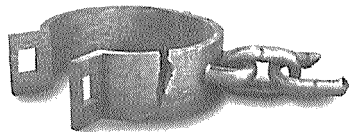
I don’t even hesitate. “Yes.”

His dimple appears again, and he squeezes my hand and says in an intentionally loud voice, “Anything for you, honey.”

As we walk over to Olya, I can’t help but feel like I’ve been getting hit by a Mack truck with Hudson’s name stamped all over it from the second we walked into this store.

I just hope I don’t end up with tire tracks on my heart.

## Only Fools and Vampires Rush In...



I have to admit, Hudson's idea was smart. After I tried on the cuff, he inspected it, turning it this way and that...until he found the word he'd been hoping to find etched inside it: *FALIASOLI*. If the jeweler refused to tell us more, at least we had the name of the blacksmith's wife now. Surely that was a good start.

I explained to the jeweler that I just didn't think this cuff was as flattering as the ring Hudson had already bought me, and she happily nodded (since, of course, she'd made the ring herself) and put the cuff back in its case.

"It's hard to compete with a *Soli promise* ring," she says. "Believe me, I get it."

My eyes go wide—I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to say to that, especially with all the undercurrents suddenly flowing between Hudson and me—but I'm saved from answering when a mother and daughter come into the shop, chattering brightly.

The mother stops and stares at us, but the little girl smiles and waves. At the prospect of having a new customer, Olya seems to give in and says, "If you really want a cuff like that one, Falia Bracka made it." She then tosses out some directions to her house (today is her day off) and wishes us luck before turning to the mother and daughter inspecting a case with lockets inside.

We wave and thank Olya one more time for the ring before making our way to the door. I share a smile with Hudson as we realize we've got the information we came for. We're one step closer to freeing the Unkillable Beast and finding the Crown.

As we wander back to the market to meet up with our friends, I can't help wondering what's going to happen next.

Especially since Hudson is still holding my hand. The one with a *promise* ring weighing it down.

I decide, as we exit the store, that Hudson can call me a coward all he wants, but no way am I going to ask what I might have promised to do when he placed that magical ring on my finger. Not today, Satan. Not today.

Thankfully, he seems perfectly comfortable not bringing it up, and we spend the next hour and a half wandering around, waiting on our group. And I, at least, also spend it eating all the food. Like, all the food.

Every food vendor we pass wants us to try their wares for free—guests of the royal colossor and all that—and since Hudson doesn't eat, I'm the one who has to try everything. And I mean everything.

Normally, it wouldn't be a chore. The food is delicious and I've been living on cherry Pop-Tarts and granola bars a little too much lately, but the portion sizes are enormous. No matter how many times I tell them "just a little bit," I end up with at least half of what a giant would eat...at every single food booth.

Which means by the time our two hours are up, I am beyond stuffed with beef pastries, forest falafel (which tastes a lot better than its woodland name suggests), boysenberry tarts, a smoked turkey leg (only because I refused the whole turkey), a giant skewer of roasted vegetables and fruit, and one barbecued rib from what had to be the largest cow in existence.

"We have to go," I whisper to Hudson after I manage to choke down a couple of bites of the rib. "I can't eat any more. I can't."

Hudson nods as he steers me away from the last part of the market.

The second we're out of sight, I trash the rib in the first garbage can I find. "I don't think I've ever eaten that much in my life."

"I have to admit, I'm impressed," Hudson jokes. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"That's the problem," I tease. "Everybody always underestimates me."

"A lot of people do," he says, and he sounds a lot more serious than I intended him to. "But I never have."

"What does that mean?" I ask, sending him an arched look.

"It means I've never met anyone like you before, Grace. I think you can do anything you want to do."

It's a really big compliment, especially coming from Hudson, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that. At least until he smirks and continues. "Well, besides trying to eat an entire restaurant full of food in one day. Big fail on that one."

"You know what? I'm totally okay with failing there," I shoot back. "Especially since the person calling me on it basically subsists on a few glasses of blood a day."

"Are you blood shaming me now?" He gives me a mock-offended look.

I roll my eyes. "I'm pretty sure that's not a thing."

"It is *totally* a thing."

"Because you say so?" I arch a brow.

"Maybe." He narrows his eyes at me. "You got a problem with that?"

"Maybe I do. In fact—" I break off as Flint calls to me from across the square.

"Hey! There you are, New Girl."

It's Hudson's turn to roll his eyes. "Dragons really do have the worst timing, don't they?"

Mekhi, Eden, Luca, and Flint descend on us seconds later. "Oh my God," Eden says as she takes the last sip of a giant milkshake and tosses the cup in the nearest recycle bin. "That was so good, but I am so full."

"They got you, too, huh?" I ask sympathetically.

"They got us all," Flint answers. "When I saw Macy a little while ago, she was more than a little green around the gills."

"Nice people, though," Luca says with a grin. "Everyone has been so friendly."

Mekhi shrugs. "Yeah, but we got absolutely no info on the blacksmith."

"That's because you're all amateurs," Hudson gloats. "His wife's name is Falia, and she's a jewelry maker from the Soli tree." He winks at me. "We also got directions to her house."

"We're never going to live this down, are we, Eden?" Mekhi jokes.

"What can I say?" I tease. "Sometimes you got it—"

"And sometimes you don't," Hudson finishes.

Mekhi rolls his eyes, but Eden doesn't reply. She's too busy staring at my right hand. "She's a jewelry maker, you say? Is that why Grace is suddenly wearing a promise ring?"

All eyes turn to me, and I squirm. "It's just a ring." I shrug. "I thought it was pretty."

Flint whistles long and hard, then says, "Dude, you already got her a *promise* ring? I thought that was, like, a hundred-year anniversary gift or something. Da-yum." If I'm not mistaken, there is actual admiration in



Flint's green eyes for the vampire he normally only vaguely tolerates on the best of days.

Not to be left out of the fun, Mekhi adds, "Holy hell. What did you promise her? You know that shit's, like, forever, right?"

All the guys snicker at that, Flint fist-bumping Mekhi as he mentions something about Hudson being "bond whipped." For his part, Hudson takes the ribbing good-naturedly, but his gaze darts to mine a few times, probably to gauge if I'm going to ask what *he* promised *me* with the magical ring. Well, he'll have to wait for that, because all I feel is relief that I didn't actually make some lust-drunk promise to wash this guy's sheets for an eternity.

Only Eden seems to not find the humor in the ring, one eyebrow going up as she says to me pointedly, "I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"Almost never," I reply, and it's the truth.

She chuckles but doesn't add anything else.

After another five minutes of everyone trying to guess what Hudson promised me, Eden asks, "Do you think we should go talk to Falia now, while Macy and Jaxon are entertaining Erym?"

Luca adds, "Or do you think we should wait for them?"

"I think Jaxon will kill us if we leave him with a lovesick thirteen-year-old for much longer," I comment.

"More reason to bail, if you ask me," Flint says, and there's something in his voice that has me looking at him closely, wondering if he's really as happy as he's seemed lately.

But his eyes are clear, the smile on his face easy, and I decide I must be mistaken.

"I'll text him and Macy," Mekhi says, pulling out his phone. "Let him know where we're going and to keep Erym occupied for a little longer."

We head west as we were instructed, and it isn't long before the quaint, structured environmentalism of town gives way to wilderness and unstructured forest. Houses start looking more run-down and are coming further and further apart.

I'm stressing a little, afraid that *on the lake* isn't going to be enough directions to find Falia's house, but once the lake comes into view, I realize it isn't quite the problem I thought it would be.

To begin with, it's more of a pond than a lake, so there are only two structures on the whole north edge of it. One is a small shed that looks like a

stiff wind would knock it down. The other is a house carved into and around one of the largest redwood trees I've ever seen.

The one I saw in town was nearly ninety feet across, with a shop carved into the first twenty feet or so of the trunk. This tree is easily that large in diameter, maybe even a little bigger. But instead of carving into the bottom of the tree, someone has built all the way around it—without carving into it at all. Considering redwoods don't have big branches like the trees that usually hold treehouses, it is one of the most amazing things I have ever seen.

There's a staircase that starts at the bottom of the tree and winds its way around and around it in a widely spaced diagonal pattern. I'm on the ground looking up, so I'm not really sure how high it goes, but it looks like it doesn't stop until close to 150 feet up the trunk. But the staircase isn't even the most interesting or magnificent part of the tree.

That goes to the platforms extending over the staircase, built snugly against the side of the tree in all directions, that wind their way up the trunk along with the staircase. The platforms, like the staircase, are built on all four sides of the tree, so one faces east, the next one north, and so on, all the way up the tree.

Whoever built the platforms didn't carve into the tree to secure them—they obviously wanted to make sure not to harm the tree in any way—but they fit the trunk so perfectly that they must be custom-built. Each platform has a roof over it, and most are even screened in.

"Each room is built onto a different part of the tree," Flint says in awe as we stand back and study it.

"I've never seen anything like it," Eden comments. "It's brilliant."

"And old," Mekhi agrees. "Who would have thought they would have had this kind of construction know-how hundreds of years ago? Or been so concerned about the tree that they made so much extra work for themselves? Most people didn't even think about the earth way back then."

I start to say something about generalizing, but then I remember who I'm talking to. People who have been alive a really long time—and who know exactly what life was like a couple hundred years ago...or more.

"Earth magic," I remind him. "It's hard to do something to hurt the earth when you're so intimately connected to it."

"Maybe so, but something is definitely hurting that tree," Luca says. "See how different it looks from the ones around it? All those strips and cankers

on the bark mean it's really sick."

"Not the house," Hudson agrees. "But yeah, something is definitely making it sick."

We look all the way up to the thin branches that adorn the top quarter of the tree. And I realize that even the treetop looks sick with the way it's wilting forward.

"What do you think is wrong with it?" I ask as we finally get close enough to see it in the sunlight.

As we do, I'm struck by how it really was an engineering feat of incredible marvel.

The whole house—the whole property—looks like it was once well loved and beautiful. All the bones are here, from the cheerful carvings on the staircase and room railings to the large, fenced-off garden that I'm sure was a sight to see in its heyday. Even the roses, now growing wild throughout the land on this half of the pond, once had a place to belong: a circular area off to the side of the tree that looks like it was overgrown a hundred years ago, maybe even more.

As I look at this place, I'm reminded of one of the versions of *Sleeping Beauty* my mother read to me when I was a kid. After the girl pricked her finger and fell into a sleep for a hundred years, the entire castle fell asleep with her. All the plants continued to grow until the castle was overrun on all sides. Everything was dusty and in ill repair, simply waiting for Aurora to wake up. Waiting for her to return and make the place whole again.

This entire parcel of land has that same feel to me. Like everything about it has been waiting so long that it has given up. Waited so long that every piece of it is slowly dying.

It's one of the saddest things I've ever seen in my life.

"So how are we going to do this?" Luca asks. "Knock on the door and ask if she just happens to be married to the person who made an unbreakable pair of shackles for an Unkillable Beast? And if so, how do we break them, please and thank you?"

"Your optimism is heartwarming," Flint tells him as he gently knocks their shoulders together.

"Sorry. We probably should have talked about this before." I think for a minute. "If Falia is as sad as Olya says she is, I think honesty really is the best policy. She doesn't need more drama in her life."

"That's fair," Eden agrees "But maybe we all shouldn't knock on the door together. We don't want to scare her."

"She's a giant," Mekhi retorts. "I'm pretty sure she could rip us limb from limb if she wanted to."

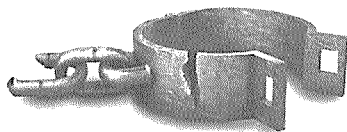
"Good point," she answers. "On second thought, maybe we need Jaxon and Macy, too."

"You know, I totally wasn't prepared for how big these giants are," Flint says as we start down what was once a well-structured walkway and is now just pieces of broken cement overrun by weeds. "Admittedly, Damasens is the only giant I've ever met before, but he's a shrimp compared to most of these people."

"Right?" Luca agrees. "I was prepared for them to all be seven or eight feet, but these people are huge! I met a guy today who had to be close to twenty feet."

"No wonder they have to live out here," Eden comments. "We think we've got it bad, having to hide our existence from regular people. But so many of the giants we met today can't hide, even if they wanted to. It's so not fair to them."

"I hope she's nice," I whisper as we finally reach the stairs at the bottom of the tree. But before we can so much as begin to scale the first step—which is several feet off the ground—the very unmistakable sound of someone weeping drifts down the stairs right at us.



“It sounds like her heart is breaking,” Eden whispers, and for once, the very tough dragon sounds like she’s choked up.

“No,” I disagree. “It sounds like her heart is already broken. And has been for a very, very long time.”

I recognize the sound.

“Is it coming from upstairs?” Mekhi asks as he vaults up the first step... or tries to.

The second his foot touches it, the staircase rolls several yards up the tree.

“Umm, what just happened?” Eden asks as we all kind of look at one another.

“I have no idea,” Mekhi replies as the staircase rolls itself back down several seconds later.

Luca tries next, and it does the same thing. It just rolls itself up. Only this time, the guardrails move, too. Except, it’s not the actual guardrails that move. It’s the carvings inside them—pictures of a woman and two children doing all kinds of different things.

Swimming in the pond.

Tending the roses.

Digging up stones for the jewelry.

Baking cookies.

The list goes on and on...and the people in each of those carvings are literally scampering up the tree away from us.

“What. The. Actual. Hell?” Flint asks, and he sounds amazed.

“I don’t know,” I say, stepping up to put a hand on the tree trunk.

I’m prepared to tap into my earth magic to try and figure this out, but the second I touch the tree trunk, I realize I don’t have to. The tree is literally screaming on the inside.

"It's tapped in to her," I whisper as sadness whispers through me. "It's drowning in her emotions."

"What's wrong with her?" Eden asks, and for the first time since I met her, she sounds reticent. Like she isn't sure she wants to know.

"She's been missing her mate for a long time," Hudson says quietly, and there's a somberness to him that sets off all the alarm bells inside me.

Is this what I'm dooming Jaxon to now that our mating bond is broken?

Or is this what will happen to me if Hudson is sent to prison and I don't join him?

Either way, the thought is horrifying. Devastating. Soul-crushing.

"Maybe we should go," I say, stepping away from the tree with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Go?" Flint stares at me incredulously. "This is the whole reason we're even here."

"I know. I just..." Truthfully, I don't want to face what this feels like. It wasn't that long ago that Cole broke my mating bond with Jaxon, and I could barely get off the ground. I don't want to remember what that felt like. I sure as hell don't want to be immersed in the agony of it all.

Yes, I have Hudson now. But that only makes it all scarier. Because losing Jaxon nearly killed me. What happens if I lose the mate who was my destiny?

Just the thought has anxiety skating under my skin, and it takes every ounce of courage I have not to run away.

Just feeling the tree scream was enough to put cracks in my very fragile heart. I don't know if I've got it in me to take on Falia as well.

"Hey." Hudson puts a hand on my lower back and wraps himself halfway around me. He looks at the tree, grim-faced, and I know he knows what I'm thinking. What I'm feeling. He pulls me closer into the shelter of his body and whispers, "I've got you. I promise."

"I know," I answer as the warmth of him seeps into me. As the heat of our connection works its way past the cold and burrows into my very bones.

I just wish I knew how long it will last. Forever, like the mating bond lore says it should? Or is that just another pipe dream that can be snatched away from me whenever someone decides to do so?

But now isn't exactly the time for a crisis like this, so I shove the doubts back down and force a little half smile as I look up at Hudson. "I'm good."

He doesn't buy it—neither the words nor the smile. But he gives me one

more tight squeeze, almost like he's trying to instill his own confidence within me, before he lets me go.

Once he does, I realize the others are busy trying to figure out how to climb a tree that very definitely doesn't want to be climbed.

And every time one of them attempts it, something more severe happens. Not only does the staircase move, but when Flint tries to climb the tree, very worn, very aged leather rolls down over the first two screened-in platforms, hiding the rooms from view.

When Hudson tries, the tree drops hundreds of small pine cones on our heads.

And when I finally try, well, the minute I touch the tree, all I hear is screaming so loud and anguished that I immediately let go.

Through it all, Falia continues to weep.

"What. The. Hell?" Flint exclaims again.

"I don't think she wants to see us," Luca says.

"But we still need to see her," Eden adds, frustration rife in her voice. She walks around the tree 180 degrees until she gets to the area where the crying is coming from. And there, three platforms up, is a woman in gray, sobbing her eyes out.

"Hey!" Eden calls, but she doesn't get an answer.

"Excuse me?" Flint cups his hands around his mouth and joins in the shouting.

Nothing.

"We're sorry to bother you," I shout up, "but can we have just a minute of your time?"

Still nothing.

Eventually, Luca gets tired of waiting and jumps straight to the platform. Except the second he lands on the wood, the floor swings up and sends him spiraling back to earth.

Even though it probably isn't necessary—vampires always land on their feet—Flint hustles and catches him. Luca grins and whispers, "My hero," just loudly enough for us to hear him.

Flint flushes a little with embarrassment, but his grin is huge.

"Well, that didn't work," Mekhi teases. "The way it slapped you back, I was sure you were going to end up doing your best impression of a vamp cannonball."

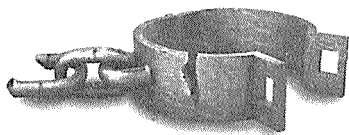
Luca laughs. "Yeah, me too."

"Now what?" I ask, because we really need to talk to Falia. And to do that, we're going to have to get past this tree's amazing security system.

Except as we circle the tree, trying to figure out how to breach its defenses, I finally realize that the crying has stopped. Right before I look up and see a tall woman in a gray sweatshirt and a long gray skirt walking slowly down the staircase.

Apparently, Falia has decided to come to us.





## A Fate Worse than Death

She doesn't say anything until she gets to the bottom part of the staircase. And even then, it's only, "Can I help you?" in a voice so rusty with disuse, it's barely understandable.

No rebukes about the shouting, no queries about why we decided to jump into one of the rooms *in* her house, nothing but a polite smile and tragic gray eyes that make my heart ache just looking at her.

"We're so sorry to bother you," I say, stepping forward and holding out my hand. "My name is Grace, and these are my friends." I don't introduce all of them because it's fairly obvious she doesn't care.

She studies my hand for a while, then reaches out to shake it. But the house interferes again, raising the stair she's on until our hands are too far apart.

Falia watches with a small smile. "I'm sorry. The house is very protective of my girls and me."

"Very protective" is one way to put it. "I think it's amazing," I tell her, because I do. I've never even imagined a place like this could exist.

"My mate built it for me." Her eyes go shuttered, and her warm brown skin turns a little sickly looking. "Every part of the house can move to open up for more space or close down in protection, with pulleys and levers. My mate wanted this house to be a safe sanctuary for the kids and me, but now, well, the tree uses its earth magic to protect us. He's so much more than a blacksmith."

"Absolutely," Hudson agrees from where he's studying the elaborate carvings on the handrail. "His craftsmanship is incredible."

"It is," she agrees. "But my mate didn't do those."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Hudson looks embarrassed by his assumption. "Did you—"

"The house did them," she tells him, and for the first time, there's a tiny twinkle in her eyes. "For my mate, so that when he returned, he would be able to see all the things that he missed."

And just like that, the carvings make a lot more sense. Two girls picking apples, learning to swim, dancing in the forest. These are records for their father, of his children growing up.

"That's so beautiful," I tell her. It's also sad, but I don't tell her that. Then again, I don't have to—it's written in every pore of her skin, every breath that she takes.

She nods her thanks. Then asks, "How may I help you?"

"Actually, we were hoping to talk to you." Flint gives her his signature grin. "We have some questions, if you don't mind?"

It doesn't seem to work, as her voice is as listless as the rest of her when she asks, "About what?"

I think about lying, about trying to get in the door with some bullshit story. But I'm a terrible liar at the best of times, and I don't think this woman would fall for it anyway. She's sad, not naive, and I don't think she has any stomach for bullshit.

So in the end, I tell her the truth and just hope for the best. "We want to talk to you about your mate, if you don't mind."

"Vander?" she asks, a trace of desperation in her tone. "Do you have news of him?"

"No." My heart breaks all over again. "No, I'm sorry. We were actually hoping you would be able to tell us about him."

"Oh." The painful flash of hope fades from her eyes as she turns around and starts back up the stairs.

When she doesn't say anything else, I don't know if she wants us to follow her or if she wants us to get lost. I'm guessing the latter...especially when the handrail slides across the stairs, barring us from even the option of following her.

Except Falia stops when she gets to the first platform and says, "You all had better come inside, then. Would you like some tea?"

Out of nowhere, the handrail springs back into place.

"We would love some tea," Flint tells her as he bounds up the stairs after her. "Thank you so much for asking."

And that's what I love about him. He's bold and brash and super funny

most of the time. But he's also incredibly gentle when he needs to be, and as he follows Falia up to the second platform, he talks to her as softly and sweetly as I have ever heard him talk to anyone.

She doesn't really respond, but she doesn't recoil, either. And as we climb higher, the tree stalking us suspiciously with every step we take, I hear her ask him if he would like some of the cookies her daughter made for her.

He says yes—a dragon never turns down food—and I make it up to the second platform just in time to see him flop down into the chair closest to where she's standing.

"Please sit," she tells the rest of us as she fills a kettle with water from a pitcher.

Hudson starts to give me a boost up onto one of the giant-size couches, but before he can, the platform does it for me. The wood beneath my feet pushes upward and plops me right down on the couch before settling back into place.

The others wait for it to do the same for them, but it doesn't. It just lays there, and Hudson can't help laughing as he jumps up to sit beside me. "Even the house likes you more than the rest of us."

"More like it knows I've got less skills than the rest of you," I shoot back as everyone else settles down on the various other pieces of furniture.

I look around as Falia busies herself getting mugs out of a small—well, small for giants—outdoor buffet. I don't know what I thought when we followed her up here, but I didn't expect the platform to look so normal. Giant-size, yes, but still normal.

This one is apparently a sitting room, designed around the large firepit table in the center of the platform. It's beautifully wrought iron—obviously a giant design—with the fire in the middle and an iron-filigree tabletop all the way around it. Surrounding the firepit are two large sofas on two of the sides and two chairs on the other.

Falia walks over and puts the largest teakettle I have ever seen onto the firepit, then takes the lid off a large kitchen tin. Inside are homemade chocolate chip cookies the size of my head. "My daughter makes these for me. Usually they go to waste, but I'm sure she would be happy to hear I shared them with some people who might actually enjoy them."

As we pass the cookies around, she puts a quick tray together with cups the size of soup bowls, spoons, honey, and several different types of tea bags.

Hudson jumps up and offers to carry it over to the firepit table—even though it's almost as big as he is.

"Thank you," she says as she runs a nervous hand through her short, dark curls. "I'm sorry. I haven't had visitors in..." She shakes her head, sighs. "In a very long time."

"Thank *you*," Hudson tells her. "For inviting us in. We appreciate it very much."

She shrugs as she settles herself into the last unoccupied chair. "After a thousand years of him being gone, people are tired of hearing me talk about Vander. No one ever asks about him anymore."

"A thousand years?" Mekhi chokes out. "He's been gone a thousand years?"

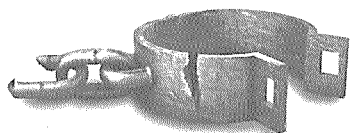
She nods, and the hand she uses to pass the tin of tea bags around is shaking so badly that I want to reach out and hold it, just to help steady her. The only thing stopping me is fear that it will hurt her more than it helps her. She looks so fragile, so tired, so *broken* that I don't want to do anything that might make her feel worse.

We busy ourselves getting cups and tea bags as we wait for her to say something else—I don't think any of us wants to be pushy. But when she doesn't speak for several minutes, Flint quietly asks, "Can you tell us what happened to Vander? We really would like to help him, and you."

Behind us, the treehouse railing starts to move back and forth, as if agitated. But it doesn't do anything else, like try to silence us or toss us off the platform, so I decide to call it a win.

Again, Falia doesn't answer right away. In fact, the silence goes on so long that I almost decide this is a lost cause. At least until she whispers, "The vampire king did this. The vampire king betrayed us all."

## With This Ring



“Vampire king,” Hudson repeats, his whole body tensing. “You mean Cyrus?”

“He is cruel,” she murmurs, and though she’s talking to us, it’s apparent that, at least in some part, she’s locked in her head with memories no one should ever have. “Deceptive. Evil.”

So far, that sounds exactly like Cyrus, so the rest of us just kind of nod to encourage her to keep going.

“He came to Vander almost a thousand years ago now, with a request for unbreakable chains. He didn’t tell him who the chains were for, only that they needed to hold a monster of unprecedented strength, a monster who would bring destruction to the entire world if he was not stopped. A monster who would destroy everyone and everything Vander loved, if he couldn’t find a way to forge chains strong enough to hold him.

“I didn’t trust the vampire.” She shakes her head, tightens the hold she has on herself as she starts to rock, just a little. “There was something not right about him, even then. I could see it in his eyes. Malice, greed, decay. It was all right there, if only Vander would look.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly, but she just shakes her head.

“It’s not your fault my mate is a stubborn, stubborn man. We fought about it for days. But the evil king said the one thing Vander couldn’t ignore, and he definitely couldn’t let it go. We had just had twin girls, and he loved them—and me—more than all the stars in the sky.

“Cyrus played on that,” she adds as she starts scratching her ring finger like it’s on fire.

I follow her movement and realize there are long scratches in her skin—welts and scabs up and down the finger. I wonder if she has a bug bite or something, though I can’t imagine what bug would leave a bite annoying

enough to make someone as big as Falia scratch herself until she bleeds.

“Cyrus made Vander believe—*really* believe—that this monster would find a way to harm us if we left him unchecked. He pointed to some terrible destruction that the beast was supposedly responsible for, told Vander that he had the giants in his sights next, and if they didn’t find a way to stop him, the beast would come for us first, because he knew we had the power to destroy him.”

My stomach churns at the story she’s telling, at the evil that has been coursing through Cyrus’s veins forever. And at the fact that this monster had a hand in raising Hudson and, to a lesser extent, Jaxon. That these two vulnerable boys have had to suffer at the hands of this evil for two centuries. It breaks my heart even as it rekindles the rage inside me, rage that I’m growing more and more afraid will never truly die.

I glance at Hudson, who is looking at his feet, as if the mere act of raising his head is too much for him to bear. His face is blank, but his fists are clenched so tightly that I’m afraid he’s going to break something. I want nothing more than to hug him, to smooth his hair back from his face and promise him that it’s going to be okay.

That, when this is all said and done, *he’s* going to be okay.

But I don’t know if I believe that any more than he does...and he’s not looking at me anyway. So instead of trying to reassure him, I turn back to the blacksmith’s wife and will her to continue with her story. Because if she doesn’t, any hopes I have of keeping Hudson safe go up in smoke.

“Vander believed him,” she finally begins again, absently scratching at her finger. “Over me, over everyone, he believed him. And he worked like a man possessed, day after day, night after night, for months, until he finally created the chains that Cyrus was so desperate for.”

She breathes out then, seems to sink into herself, but the story isn’t done. What happens next is the most important part, and I’m on the edge of my seat. Except she seems in no hurry to tell us any more, and I am seconds away from screaming in frustration. I need to know what happened to Vander. If we can’t get him to help free the Unkillable Beast so we can take the Crown...I can’t even consider what might happen to Hudson next. Or Jaxon. Or Katmere.

“Please,” I beg when she doesn’t say anything else and I can’t take the silence anymore. “Please tell me what Cyrus did to your husband.”

“What does Cyrus ever do when he’s done using someone? He discarded

him,” she finally whispers, and my stomach sinks.

Was Vander dead? We hadn’t even considered that possibility, and now my chest feels like a vise is gripping it. My heart is pounding, and I can barely breathe, but I force myself to ask, “Did he kill Vander?”

The giant’s soft eyes fill with tears. “That would have been a mercy. To us all.” She shakes her head. “Since the king had no reason or justification for killing Vander, he did the next best thing—he accused him of treason against the Crown and had him sent to the Aethereum.”

The tree is shaking all around us now, as if it is as enraged about what Cyrus did as we are. The branches sway, the trunk trembles, and the carvings on the handrails seem to turn in to themselves, like the story she is telling is too awful for the children carved into the handrail to hear.

“Prison?” It’s the last thing I expect her to say, even though knowing it reveals that there really is a scary kind of parallel between what happened to the blacksmith and what Cyrus is threatening to do to his own son.

Of course, if it’s not broke, why fix it? For all I know, Cyrus could have used this same method for dealing with his enemies a thousand times.

It’s a sobering thought.

“How long was he sentenced for?” Mekhi asks.

“Forever?” She laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “It’s been a thousand years, and he hasn’t returned.”

“Has no one tried to break him out?” Eden asks.

“Break him out?” Her laugh is phlegmy and broken. “Cyrus would kill him before seeing that happen. And I hear tales that it’s impossible anyway.” She scratches at her ring finger yet again. “No, but one day I hope to join him there. When the grandkids are older.”

“Join him?” Now I really don’t understand. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Do you know what it’s like to be without your mate, day in and day out, for a thousand years?” she whispers. “For an *eternity*? I should have gone with him then, when Cyrus had him taken away. But we had the babies, and Vander made me promise to stay with them, to take care of them until they could take care of themselves. I agreed, not knowing that I was damning us both. Not knowing it would be a fate worse than death.”

This time when she looks at me, her eyes are way past haunted. They are desperate, devastated, *dying*, and the sight of them sends terror pouring

down my spine in frozen rivers.

"I'm sorry," I whisper even as my stomach hollows. Desperate to give her any small modicum of comfort that I can, I reach over and rest my hand on hers. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," she tells me, and there are tears in her eyes as she starts to pat the back of my hand with hers. But she freezes the moment her fingers come into contact with mine.

"That ring. You have a mate, too?" she asks, low and urgent.

I glance at Hudson, who is looking between us with narrowed eyes.

"I bought it for her," he says before I can answer.

This time when she moves to scratch her finger, I realize that she is wearing a ring, too—one that is silver, with several symbols inscribed on it. One that looks an awful lot like mine.

She rubs her fingers over the ring, ends up wringing her hands. "I wish you more luck with yours than I've had with mine," she tells me, and it sounds like she's about to cry.

"What does that mean?" Hudson asks, his voice unusually strident. And he's so tense now that I fear one wrong move might shatter him. "What's wrong with your ring?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. It works just as intended."

"And that is how?" Eden asks urgently, and I can't help but remember how concerned she was when she saw the ring. And how disapproving.

"Vander gave me this ring nearly twelve hundred years ago, along with a promise that he hasn't been able to keep for a thousand years." She rubs at her finger again. "It itches and burns incessantly every day the promise goes unfulfilled. It's like it knows the promise can never be fulfilled and wants me to take it off. But I can't."

"Why not?" I ask, almost afraid to breathe.

"My poor, sweet child." She shakes her head. "Because if you remove the ring, the promise is forgiven."

"So why not take yours off?" There's a slight edge of hysteria in my voice now, but I'm not sure why. "If Vander can't fulfill the promise, why torture yourself and not remove the ring?"

"He promised he would come home to me," she says on a broken sob. "As long as I wear this ring, I know he's still alive—he will one day fulfill his promise."



“He has no choice?” Eden asks.

“The promise must be fulfilled. Forever...or until you remove the ring or the giver dies,” Falia says. “Which is why, despite everything, I’m grateful for this small piece of silver. Because it tells me my Vander is still alive, even after all these years.”

But she sighs and runs a finger over my ring one more time. “I’m very tired. Thank you for the visit, but I fear I must rest now.”

Hudson leans forward, holds her gaze. “Cyrus is trying to send me to the Aethereum as well. I will go—and I will find your husband and bring him home to you.”

My chest tightens as her face softens. Hudson doesn’t even hesitate to offer his own safety and sanity to end her suffering. It’s humbling.

But she shakes her head. “My dear, no one breaks out of the Aethereum. If they could, Vander would have found a way and fulfilled his promise.” Then she turns her gaze on me, piercing me with its intensity. “When the time comes, go with your mate.”

I swallow. “Is there no other option for you now?”

She lifts a hand and cups my cheek until the pressure makes my jaw ache. “When you must make a choice as horrible as mine, only death will free us both.”